

衣笠彰梧

KINUGASA SYOUGO

トモセシュンサク

TOMOSESHUNSAKU

4

ようこそ
実力至上主義
の**教室**へ

ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゆぎ
のきょうしつへ



Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no
Kyouushitsu e

Welcome to the Classroom of the Know-It-Alls

vol.4

by Kinugasa Syohgo

[Novel Updates](#)

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Illustrations

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ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしさが
あまのじつへ

ようこそ**実**力至上主義の**教**室へ

衣笠彰梧 × トモセシュンサク

いぶき みお
伊吹 澤

Cクラスのクラスメイト。
独裁的にCクラスを支配
し、通常とは異なる戦略
をとり続けている龍園の
ことを心底嫌っている。

「だったら今、ここで
再戦してやろうじゃない」

「学力だ？
くだらねーな。
そんなものには
何の価値もない」

りゅう えん かける
龍園 翔

Cクラスの男子生徒で、クラス
のリーダー。非常に頭がキレる
が、結果を重視する手段を選ば
ないものばかりであり、大勢を
不幸にする。

「……優待者を
見つけたした、ってことか？」

「勝つわ」

堀北はそう短く答えた。



4

ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ


氏 名	一之瀬帆波	いちのせ ほなみ
クラス	1年B組	
学籍番号	S01T004620	
部活動	無所属	
誕生日	7月20日	
評 価		
学 力	B+	
知 性	A	
判断力	B	
身体能力	C	
協調性	A-	

面接官からのコメント

高校一年生の生徒としては、非常に高い能力を持つ。同学年の葛城、坂柳などAクラスの生徒と変わらぬポテンシャルを持っていると推察するが、中学時代における長期間の欠席など不安視されるところもあるため、Bクラスへの配属とする。

担任メモ

私が全幅の信頼を寄せる女の子。バラバラだったBクラスをすぐにまとめ上げた素直な性格と高い能力。間違いなくAクラスでもおかしくない女の子だね。

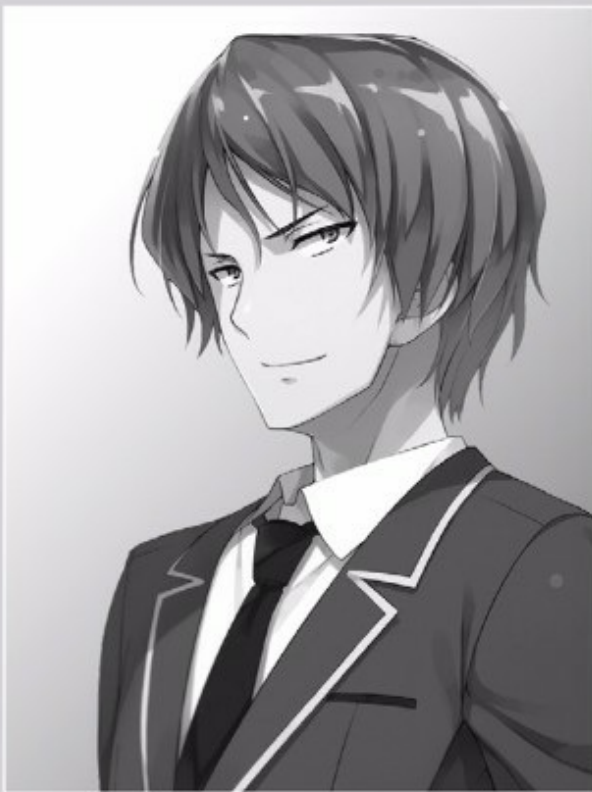
氏 名	葛城康平	かつらぎ こうへい
クラス	1年A組	
学籍番号	S01T004706	
部活動	無所属	
誕生日	8月29日	
評 価		
学 力	A	
知 性	A	
判断力	B	
身体能力	C	
協調性	B-	

面接官からのコメント

小、中学校と常にトップの成績を維持し、長年生徒会の一員として生徒をまとめ上げてきた実績を高く評価すると共に、将来的には当校の生徒会役員になることを期待したい。よってAクラスへの配属を決める。

担任メモ

クラスの中心人物で、非常に冷静な判断と慎重な性格をしている。欠点らしい欠点もなく、Aクラスの生徒として相応しい行動に励んでもらいたい。

氏 名	神崎隆二	かんざき りゅうじ
クラス	1年B組	
学籍番号	S01T004662	
部活動	無所属	
誕生日	1 2月5日	
評 価		
学 力	B	
知 性	B	
判断力	B	
身体能力	B	
協調性	D+	

面接官からのコメント

成績表では欠点らしい欠点もなく、Aクラス候補であったが面接における消極的な言動と態度には成長の余地があり、改善を求めたい部分である。交友関係は浅く、人付き合いを苦手としているため、そちらの面の向上にも今後期待していきたい。

担任メモ

頭もいいし運動神経もいいし、イケメン。問題行動を起こす様子もないことからとても良い子です。ただ、もうちょっと積極的なところが欲しいかな。

氏 名	坂柳	<div>さかやなぎ</div> <div>Unknown</div>
クラス	1年 A 組	
学籍番号	S01T004737	
部活動	無所属	
誕生日	3月 1 2 日	
評 価		
学 力	A	
知 性	A	
判断力	A	
身体能力	E -	
協調性	C +	

面接官からのコメント

先天性心疾患のため身体は非常に弱く運動の一切を禁じられています。また歩行の問題から常時杖を携帯することを許可しています。くれぐれも無理させないよう各位注意をしてください。

担任メモ

同学年でも飛びぬけた成績を持つ生徒で、学校のプロフィールでは計り知れない高水準な思考能力を持っていると推察される。落ち着きもありクラスからの信頼も厚い。ただし好戦的な思考のため同クラスメイトの葛城との衝突には注意が必要である。

漫画：一乃ゆゆ

やつほー！ 宣伝担当の
いちのせほなみ
一之瀬帆波ですっ♡

……ほりきたすずね
堀北鈴音よ

今日は
コミカライズ版の
宣伝に来ましたっ！

ねえ一之瀬さん？
私忙しいのだけれど

宣伝なら
やりたい人が
やれば…

まあまあ！

何ならオレが…

あやのこうじ
綾小路くん？
あなたには
無理よ



Prologue: Karuizawa Kei's Monologue

In the end, even after I entered this school. Nothing had changed. No, perhaps it was that I had no intention of changing anything from the start. For better or for worse, it was the same as that time. The reason for that was very simple. I understand myself more than anyone else does. Both my strengths and my weaknesses, I know them all. I know none of the boys and none of the girls like me. Even though I understood that clearly I didn't think to change. But it doesn't matter. Because I had long since stopped perceiving it as hurtful. Because I myself wanted this.

As I got out of the shower attached to the student rooms, I looked at myself in the mirror while water droplets accumulated on my skin. How many, just how many times, have I wanted to smash this mirror into pieces? Every time I see wounds of the past in it, I am reminded of my horrid past. Suddenly feeling dizzy and nauseated, I quickly put my hands on the sink and vomit into it. Why? Why am I looked at with such eyes? Why? Why do I have to suffer like this? Why? Why? Why? I repeated the same question to myself countless times. Words that no longer carried any meaning. The past is immutable. I cannot change anyone or anything from the past anymore.

God has been very cruel to me. My very personality was destroyed by the nightmare of that time, I had also lost my youth, my friends and myself to it. I need to correct that mistake now. No matter how much they hate me, it's still better than suffering that again. Yes. I don't need 'youth'. I don't need 'friends'. The most important thing is that I protect myself. I will do whatever I must to ensure that. I am...a parasite. A weak creature incapable of surviving on its own.



Chapter 1: The peaceful days suddenly...

Three days have passed since the the test on the uninhabited island. On the luxurious cruise ship our school provided us with, nothing of note was happening and there a peaceful lull had set in. For students still in the primetime of their youth, having to undergo survival on an island like that, most would lose their rational judgment. At the end of the day, we boys are still little more than beasts and sexually active carnivores. As we watched the girls who were dilly-dallying their time away, we boys collectively began to expect a destined experience with the girls. This is still a luxurious cruise ship where you can lose yourself in a dreamlike world and forget about everything bad. Even if people were to fall in love here it wouldn't be strange at all.

Besides, I've already heard quite a few stories of students hooking up with each other on this cruise and new couples being born every other day. Unfortunately, that sort of encounter is unlikely to happen with me and I continue to spend this time alone in solitude. My situation is the same as it was before the island test. No. Perhaps the environment around me did change? Even though it was against my will, I was still forced to change my original trajectory after entering this school. Initially, I chose to enter this school for a very specific reason. "Contact with the outside until graduation is forbidden". That one school rule was the reason I entered. Right now, a "certain man" is attempting to contact me from the outside. Chabashira-sensei was the one who informed me of this. Furthermore, she's blackmailed me into helping her take the class to A Class by threatening to forcibly expel me if I did not comply. It would've been a stupid story otherwise, but lacking the power to refuse, I was forced to go along with it. I have no way of ascertaining the truth of her claims, so I decided to play it safe by assuming it to be true.

But I will not be blackmailed by her forever. For now, I will gather the necessary information and depending on the circumstances I will have to make the first move. A sweet devil whispers this into the back of my head. "Get them before they get you". That's all I need to do. But that sort of violent thought was only for a moment, I soon return to my normally pacifistic way of thinking. "If only I had the power to punch the Earth's axis out of balance" I thought. If I could only do that, there'd be no need to worry about such trivial things. Saying that, I daydreamed about living in the world of Dragon Ball. The students were uneasy at first after the test ended thinking something more would come. But nothing happened. The cruise was serene, peaceful and enjoyable. Almost as if summer vacations were already upon us. Naturally, the students switched into a festive mood. During this two-week trip it seems the latter week would be nothing but a continuous, luxurious vacation for the students.

The students were especially relaxed since the island test had just ended. And it's not exactly a bad thing. The fact that students were able to stay calm during the test itself is the reason we were able to get good results. "Hmm? Have you been in your room this whole time?". My fellow male student, Hirata Yousuke, was the one who called out to me. "There's no reason for me to go out, I don't have anyone to spend time with anyways" I reply to him. "That's not true, there's Sudou and Horikita as well" he tells me. Indeed, Sudou and Horikita are people I can technically categorize as "friends". But just because you are categorized as a "friend" there is still a hierarchy. And if you are at the bottom of that hierarchy, the treatment between friends will still be different. Sometimes when people go out, they'll only invite you once out of 10 outings. I am that sort of person, existing only to be invited once in 10 outings.

"I think Ayanokouji-kun will be able to make more friends if you were a bit more aggressive" Hirata tells me. This person is a popular man who many students like and support considerably. In particular, girls seem to

trust him a lot. He also has a girlfriend like Karuizawa. For a man as lucky and happy as Hirata, he will never understand the suffering of a loner like me. "Ayanokouji-kun's way of talking is already fine, you just need the trigger to converse" he keeps telling me. I don't need that sort of cruel kindness.

I don't need words from girls like "Eeh...you look like you could be popular". Because if I reply to them with "Then go out with me" they'll just say "That's a bit troublesome". It's because I was unable to form any friends nor have a girlfriend that I was forced to spend time alone like this. Hirata then tells me "I'm planning to go out with Karuizawa-san at 12:30 to have lunch together. Would you like to tag along with us. I'm sure it'll be fun to have you with us". "Is it just Karuizawa?" I ask him. "Not exactly, there are 3 other girls that will be with us. Do you dislike that?" he asks.

If I have to admit the truth, I've been wanting to talk a bit with Karuizawa for a while now. But...there's no need to hurry. Besides with other girls tagging along with us it will be hard to initiate a conversation with her and I definitely won't be able to liven up the lunch. "I'll have to pass, I don't think I'll get along with Karuizawa's group after all" I tell Hirata. With the completion of our 1st semester, the relationships between classmates have already been set in stone. There's no way I can build a new relationship with someone else at this point. I can already imagine Karuizawa's dislike of me.

Hirata sat down near to me, having realized that I did not want to initiate new relationships with people. "I can understand what you would be reluctant, but I want you to depend on me" Hirata finally tells me.

Hirata was ready to help anytime and anywhere with that pleasant face. I thankfully decline his offer with a shake of my head. "Only 10 minutes to

go before lunch, I think you should leave me now" I tell Hirata. "There's no need to hurry, besides I think it's fun being with you like this now" Hirata quickly replies. At first glance you may think I'm simply trying to sound strong or making excuses, but I'm actually quite satisfied with my current situation. Of course, when I first came here, I was thinking I'd be able to make 100 friends and went in with that kind of determination. But that momentum quickly died down. Although I was able to make friends with the 3 Idiots, Horikita, Kushida and Sakura. All in all, my social school life isn't doing so bad, I can be convinced of that. But the guy named Hirata was unable to leave a classmate wallow in loneliness like this. He tells me "Then how about we have lunch just the two of us together, will you be happy with that?" he proceeds to ask me.

It was just the two of us right now, with Hirata staring intently at me. It seems he'll be insistent on this to the end. "I'm fine with it, but you need to consider Karuizawa's feelings" I tell Hirata. "Its ok, I can eat with Karuizawa-san whenever I want, but with you Ayanokouji-kun, I have limited opportunities to eat together" Hirata replies. A kind person like Hirata was able to pay no attention to the fact that he was basically asking another man out for lunch. I quickly thought perhaps he swings "that way". Despite his crazy popularity, Hirata was always able to maintain his sense of rationality as a man after all.

"I don't want Karuizawa to hate me later on" I tell him in an attempt to politely decline his invitation. It seems it managed to work by appealing to Hirata's conscience. "Its ok, Karuizawa-san isn't the type to be angry at you for something like that" he replies to me. No, no. Karuizawa's definitely that type of girl I thought. Even if she pretends to be docile in front of Hirata, she's definitely the dominant type when dealing with the other girls. Perhaps she hasn't revealed that side of her to Hirata? I thought.

He almost seemed like a kind teacher trying to mercifully help bad students. "I think I'll cancel the lunch with Karuizawa-san after all" he tells me. He quickly pulls out his mobile and calls Karuizawa. I tried to stop him but Hirata uses his hands to cover my eyes and stop me. "Do you have anything you'd like to eat in particular?" he asks me. I was forced to listen to Hirata cancel the lunch date with Karuizawa. "I can eat anything...I'd just like to avoid heavy foods if possible" I finally told him. The cruise ship has a lot of restaurants. The menu ranges from junk food such as ramen and hamburgers to something like French cuisine. Since it's still daytime I'd like to eat light food if at all possible.

As I thought, Hirata really did cancel his date with Karuizawa for this. I couldn't clearly hear Karuizawa's voice through the call but Hirata forcibly shut her down and cancelled the date anyways. "Are you really fine with this?" I ask him. "Of course. Let's go to the deck. If it's only snacks it'll be easier to eat out there anyways" he tells me. Hirata opened the door and pulled me out of it. "Thank you for your cooperating during the island test I cannot thank you enough, Ayanokouji-kun. You even helped me look for the culprit" Hirata tells me. "Don't thank me for it. The credit belongs to Horikita. She's the one who found the culprit that stole the underwear" I quickly tell him in response.

"Of course that is true, but I still want to thank Ayanokouji-kun who cooperated with me without reservation" he tells me. Speaking of underwear, there's still something I want to ask him. I looked around to see if there were any people around.

"Did you return Karuizawa's underwear to her yourself?" I ask him. "Yeah after all Ibuki-san was the culprit so she was able to accept it smoothly" he tells me. The underwear I was talking about was the theft incident during the island test where the underwear of one of the girls, Karuizawa Kei, was stolen and things quickly became turbulent.

Especially since the underwear was found in one of the men's bags, the relationship between the boys and the girls became strained. But Hirata managed to resolve it by returning the underwear and figuring out the culprit. In either case, all turned out well. It was a delicate situation so was I worried about what could've happened.

I was worried that even if it's Hirata, returning a girl's stolen underwear could've turned out badly. The fact that he was able to smoothly return a girl's underwear to her might mean that he's already climbed the steps to adulthood. From the elevator in the cruise ship to the deck, students seemed to be enjoying their summer vacation in their favourite dresses.

Since there was also an on-board pool nearby both male and female students were boldly wearing swimsuits and swimming in the pool. Since the tension of the test had come undone, this was inevitable. It might have been that the pent-up rebellious desire of the students that was suppressed during the island test finally came free to result in this situation. This was compounded by the fact that you do not need to pay any points for use of the facilities provided by the cruise including food and drinks. Regardless of your points, the above things are all free. Of course, you'd still need to pay to loan swimsuits and other swimming equipment but aside from that, everything else is free.

By the time we reached the restaurant, over half the seats had already been filled. The two of us quickly secured the vacant seats that still remained amongst the crowded restaurant. "To be honest...I have something I'd like to talk to you about" Hirata tells me. While I was looking down at the menu, Hirata's voice apologetically asked me that. "What is it?" I ask him. Of course there was an ulterior motive. That's why he was so insistent on eating with me. I'm not complaining because since he went out of his way to invite me, there must be a reason for it.

"I may not be the best listener but...do you have the short version of it?" I ask him. I'm neither a good speaker nor a good listener so that's the reason I asked for the condensed version of it. "I would like you to be the bridge between me and Horikita-san, I think Horikita-san will be an indispensable person to D Class in the future and I would very much like to work together with her" Hirata tells me. I see, so he needs my help for that. I nodded as Hirata kept talking while apologizing to me. "Even the other day, it was thanks to Horikita-san's efforts that D Class won an unexpected victory. The morale of the class is soaring. I think the number of students who like Horikita-san has also gone up which is a huge change from before" he tells me.

"I suppose that's true" I say. The girl named Horikita Suzune is a D Class student who coincidentally also was my first friend here. But other than that, she's a solitary person with no friends at all. The only skill she has is the ability to be a honors student in the academic sense. But her weakness, in exchange, is that she is bad at interpersonal skills and often has a demanding attitude which causes difficulties when socializing. "Right now, I feel like together me and her and everyone else working together we can climb up together to C Class, B Class and finally A Class" Hirata says optimistically.

If I'd heard this story from anyone else I'd have brushed it aside as a convenient story. But Hirata once brought up the matter of Horikita from the start of the semester. From the start, he must have sensed the potential that Horikita had. I don't sense any ill will from Hirata. I don't mind helping him out in this regard, the task itself is relatively simple. But even if I can bring Hirata and Horikita together. But that alone won't solve the problem.

"But even if you I bridge the gap between you and Horikita, it won't go over that easily, Horikita's just that type of person". Even if I try to mend

the relationship between Horikita and Hirata it will only appear to her as unnecessary interference. If she feels that way, she might actually widen the gap between her and the rest of the class in response. Her interactions with Kushida at the start of the first semester is proof of that fact.

"Of course I do understand that fact, Horikita-san will not open herself up to anyone but Ayanokouji-kun. I don't intend on forcing this issue, that is why I would like you to be the bridge that connects my existence to Horikita-san's" he says. And so I'm supposed to tell this to Horikita is what he's saying. That means vice versa, I will also need to relay Horikita's feelings on the matter back to Hirata.

Indeed, if I act as Hirata's medium, Horikita won't have to work together with the rest of the class and we can build an invisible bridge of cooperative relationships. "It's easier said than done, usually I'm the one following Hori...to be more precise, I've never really given Horikita any opinions before. If I started giving my opinions on matters suddenly it would seem strange" I reply to him. "But as of right now I don't have any better ideas. Even if I were to talk to Horikita-san about this right now, I don't have the confidence that I'd be able to convince her to work together with us. This is my last resort" Hirata tells me.

"Isn't it a bit premature to be resorting to last resorts at this point?" I ask him. I certainly understand now his desire to work together with Horikita. But if so, he has no choice but to directly approach Horikita on the matter. I do understand that doing this might be difficult for him, but working together with others as a team is also equally difficult.

Hirata should have been able to realize something as obvious as this. He's the one who cares about this class and thinks about it and cherishes the bonds of friendship among it the most. But there's still one question

left regarding him. Back on the island, he seemed almost to be afraid of something and losing sight of himself. I still remember the strange behavior Hirata had back on the island. When the unity of D Class was compromised by the incident, he seemed to have almost been 'empty'. That is not normal behavior.

For now, I order sandwiches and some drinks. Light food overall, easy to eat. Students were swimming in the pool on the deck while others were eating while still in their swimsuits. The mood amongst the students seemed to be a festive one. If Ike and Yamauchi were here, they'd be drooling more at the girls' swimsuits than the meal itself. Hirato, on the other hand, paid no attention to the girls at all but instead was staring at me.

"Yeah, like Ayanokouji-kun said, my plan may have been a poorly thought-out one" he admitted. He's also honest to a fault and able to recognize his own mistakes in rational judgments quickly. That is one of Hirata's strengths. But it seemed his desire to cooperate with Horikita was stronger after all since he didn't show any signs of giving up on persuading me. "It seems I'll have to rethink my approach, Horikita-san is a very serious type of person. How did you manage to get along with her Ayanokouji-kun?" he asks me.

In order to strengthen his relationship with Horikita, it seems like Hirata wants to befriend her first by asking me for advice. I think that's the right attitude to take and if there's something I can do I'd like to lend him a hand. "Let me refute one of your points. It's not like I'm getting along with Horikita well or anything too, it seems like she doesn't even recognize me as a friend" I point out. "But it seems like Horikita only gets along well with you, Ayanokouji-kun". So that makes me special because I'm the only one able to get along with that one person. Or perhaps that's something a man who's easily able to befriend 40 people says. Because

of the frustration he feels from not being able to befriend this one particular person.

"Don't be so impatient, we've just finished the first semester you know?" I tell him.

The cohesion of the class is directly correlated to the time spent together. Or in some cases, when they're pitted suddenly in harsh conditions like during the island test. Of course you can force cohesion in the class by acting towards your fellow classmates but that sort of cohesion is very fragile and easily crumbles away.

"I should also add that Horikita is not the type to make friends easily" I said. I said it simply so that Hirata could understand that the fastest. "...that might be true". Perhaps he might have been impatient on that regard but Hirata's face showed a reaction. "I admit I wasn't thinking of her feelings but rather only my own desire for cooperation" Hirata told me with a smile while nodding. I'm sure he understands now. "I'm sorry, I invited you out here only to listen to my selfish request, let's eat shall we?" Hirata tells me.

Perhaps he noticed too, but after a while Hirata also became aware that someone was approaching us and looked at me with an embarrassed face.

"Ah...so you were here after all, Hirata-kun. Let's eat lunch together!". A happy voice called out to us. It was Karuizawa who was approaching us.

"Umm...Karuizawa-san, I'm sure I called you a while ago to tell you about cancelling the lunch, but..." Hirata was stumbling over his words.

Karuizawa and her friends pull another table, joins it with our table while Karuizawa quickly pushes me out of the group. The lunch suddenly became rather noisy and I, of course, have trouble socializing. But I don't need to worry. I'm used to situations like this already. In this case I will need to use my special skill "Quickly escape the scene".

I picked up my food and quietly left. My eyes met with Hirata's for a moment, but soon he was surrounded by Karuizawa and the other girls and I could no longer see him.

I guess that's one of the downsides of making too many friends. You lose the time you could spend on yourself by having to spend it on others. Even if Hirata has any personal problems he needs to consult someone on, I'm sure he cannot ask Karuizawa for advice so he'll have to keep them shut up inside.

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Having abandoned Hirata to Karuizawa, I decided to return to my room having no one to hang out with or talk to. I used the stairs instead of the elevator to go back down into the ship to the third floor where my room is. There were wet stains in the corridor, I noticed. It wasn't just my room but the stains stretched through the whole corridor. I walked along the stains, following them and noticed a man walking gracefully through the corridor wearing nothing but swimpants. His entire upper body was naked.

"S-sir! This is a problem for us, if you walk through the corridor while you're wet!" One of the staff, noticing the emergency situation, rushes down to talk to the man. The staff was already carrying a towel in his hands, as if he's always been carrying it for situations like this.

"Ha Ha Ha. It looks like you've found me" the man declares.

"Yes, sir. It's the fourth time I've found you like this. I've told you countless times before but please wipe your body off before returning to the ship. D-doing something like this will greatly inconvenience the other guests" the staff seemed to be saying.

So this is why the staff had prepared the towel in advance, he'd already seen this happen many times before.

"I make it a principle to never wipe my body down" Kouenji said while water droplets dripped from his whole body. Suddenly he stopped walking. "Do you happen to have pen and paper?" he asked the staff. "Huh?...uh I do have a notebook and a pen" the staff quickly replied to him without understanding exactly where he was going with this while awkwardly taking out a pen and his notepad. "Do you know that the signature of a celebrity can unexpectedly have a premium price, sometimes being worth tens of millions abroad?" Kouenji told the staff. "And...what of it?" he asked Kouenji in reply. Once he had finished scribbling something in the notepad with the pen, Kouenji swiftly handed it back to the staff. It was from a distance so I couldn't see properly but it seems like he had written his name 'Kouenji Rokusuke' on the notepad. "W-What is this?" the staff meekly asked him.

"Is it not obvious? It is a signature. A signature. Although it is written on such a cheap note, in the future it shall most definitely have tremendous value. I shall give this to you as a present. Accept it gratefully" Kouenji told the staff. It seems Kouenji is not such a bad guy after all, he gave the staff his signature in the hopes that it will be of use to him as a means of expressing his gratitude. But I somehow doubt it will be of much use to the staff, most likely it was just a waste of good paper and ink. "Do not make me look to be a fool, I am the man who will carry Japan's future on

his back in the future. As thanks for helping me, I will allow you to work on a much larger luxury ship then. One large enough to make this one look like a commoner's ship" Kouenji declared to the staff. Personally I thought, I'd rather not have the ship be too large and run a Titanic risk of sinking. However, Kouenji seemed to be laughing satisfactorily. The staff seemed to have lost his resolve to stop this man and only stared at the now-wet floor dejectedly.

Rumors have it that classmates actively avoid Kouenji due to this very selfish personality of his. It seems like several of my own classmates have already experienced what this staff boy had just experienced. I'm sure if it's Hirata, he would make sure to call out to Kouenji even if he gets brushed aside like the staff just now. But the man named Kouenji is like poison, and those who interact with him, friend or foe will suffer for it. To avoid such a problem, I simply and quietly walked past the two of them. "Oh. If it isn't Ayanokouji Boy? What a coincidence" Kouenji suddenly calls out my name. Unexpectedly hearing my name being called out like that, I looked back at him to see the staff boy happily smiling that the target of Kouenji's whims had shifted from him to me as if to say 'I'm finally free' to me. Indeed, Kouenji seemed to belong to some violent alien species that would greedily devour all the native species in a river. "Do you have some business with me?" I calmly ask him.

"No, no. No such thing. I am simply calling out to you as a fellow classmate. After all, you do happen to be my roommate" Kouenji replied to me as a matter-of-fact. Then he swiped down his hair and almost like a shotgun, water droplets flew off his hair and landed on my face and my uniform.

Of course, Kouenji seemed to be so absorbed in himself he did not even realize my predicament. "Then I will excuse myself" the staff boy, who was previously watching the spectacle unfold, quickly said and

shuffled away, quite clearly not willing to get any more involved in this matter. Of course, I also do not wish to be alone with Kouenji in a situation like this. "What were you talking with Kouenji about?" I asked him swiftly. For a moment, the staff boy seemed to have been slightly angry at being denied a chance to escape Kouenji but dutifully replied to me "It seemed he was wet, so I thought to provide him with a towel...but it seemed I have troubled you both, please excuse me" he told me as he rushed off from the scene.

"I see. So he was making an attempt to take care of me?" Kouenji noted. "Y-yeah, that seems to be it" I quickly told him in response. Somehow it seemed I had managed to get away from Kouenji and made it all the way back towards my room. "Still, what a coincidence. Meeting up with Kouenji on my way back here". Still, even though it was uncomfortable, I suppose it was still going to happen either way considering the troublesome lack of space being packed on this ship together. Desiring to avoid another awkward encounter, I instead opted to turn right instead of left and chose to return to my room some other time. Hirata and Yukimura, who also share the same room as me, should be returning shortly. I instead went to the nearby guide board on which the map of the ship was illustrated in a clear-to-understand manner describing the various escape routes in case of an emergency. As I listlessly walked through the corridors on the second floor area, it seemed there were not many students here at this time. Then the mobile phone in my pocket vibrated. I took it out to see that I had mail. A certain girl had called me out. Since I had nothing better to do at the time I decided to accept and headed out to meet her.

"Hah...hah...hah". By the time I approached the girl who sent me the message, Sakura, I could hear anxious sighs coming out of her mouth. "What's wrong?" I ask her. "Waaah...A-Ayanokouji-kun?". I seemed to have surprised Sakura, since she quickly panicked and called my name with a shocked voice. "Sorry for surprising you" I told her. "N-no...I-I was

just being slightly nervous". If she's this nervous about meeting a mere friend like me, her life must be pretty tough I thought. "Ayanokouji-kun, your roommates are Hirata-kun, Yukimura-kun and Kouenji-kun...right?" she asked me. "Yeah, is something the matter?". I was surprised to hear her ask such a thing. "Umm...about that...I was slightly worried about the people I'm sharing my room with..." she trailed off. It seems like Sakura isn't getting along very well with her roommates, since she was never good at socializing in the first place. By looking at her worried expression, I can understand the severity of her problems. "Are you worried that you won't be able to get along well with them?". "I'm not sure. I do feel like I want to be friends with them. But there's a part of me that wants to be alone too. I'm hopeless aren't I?" Sakura tells me.

Her voice trailed off weakly, but unless I know who Sakura is sharing her room with, I cannot give any proper advice at the current stage. "So, who're your roommates?" I ask her. "...it's Shinohara-san, Ichihashi-san and Maezono-san..." she replied with a dejected voice while giving me the names of her roommates. It's a gathering of girls with very strong and distinct personalities unlike Sakura. Speaking of Shinohara, she's a girl who's close friends with my fellow classmate Karuizawa. She's a headstrong girl who frequently quarrels with the boys and doesn't hold back against people she doesn't like. I don't think she'd hold anything against Sakura, but I doubt they'll be raring to make friends either. Ichihashi is usually more mature, but still has a somewhat headstrong attitude at times like Shinohara. I don't know much about Maezono, but she definitely seems to have somewhat of a bad attitude and certainly left a bad impression on me. For Sakura, this must be like being thrown into a den of lions. I wanted to pat her head to cheer her up even a bit. "But why ask me for help in particular?" I asked. "....I thought if it's Ayanokouji-kun...I might be able to get some good advice..." she said.

It seems she's quite dependent on me, but she quickly apologized to me for it. "I-I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun must also be busy, sorry for

depending on you like this" she said. "No problem, I don't mind being asked for advice, but I have doubts on my ability to help you" I swiftly replied. Sadly, I don't know any one of the girls Sakura just named so I probably won't be of much help to Sakura. While I was thinking of my answer, the door to the room opened. "Oh. It's Ayanokouji-kun and Sakura-san, what are you two doing here?" . It was another one of my classmates, Kushida Kikyou, who came into the guest lounge to greet us. Sakura's previously bright expression quickly darkened and the atmosphere turned awkward.

Although Kushida was clearly not aware of it, the usually antisocial Sakura rejected her presence and withdrew back into herself. Of course, Kushida kept talking without a care in the world.

"It's ok, I'm not going to disturb you two. I was on my way to meet some friends anyways" Kushida told us. "I-I'll be going back then..." Sakura weakly told me. Although Kushida was trying to excuse herself, Sakura got back up and ran back towards her room. "I'm sorry. Perhaps I came at a bad time? Should I not have called out to you?" Kushida tried to apologize to me. I thought there was no need for such apologies, Sakura is naturally bad at socializing like this anyways. "Anyways, I haven't talked to you ever since getting back to the ship, Kushida. You were out with quite a lot of friends after all" I told her. Kushida is the idol of the class. Naturally she's the most popular girl. She was genuinely living up to her words of wanting to be friends with everyone with the exception of a few loners like Sakura. "I'm going out with Class C today, do you want to come with me, Ayanokouji-kun?" Kushida asked me. "Err...can I join?" I asked. "You're coming?" she sounded surprised. This is shaping up to be a bad day indeed I thought. Kushida seemed slightly puzzled by my response. I quickly thought I needed to decline this invitation. "I'm joking, you know I'm not the type to hang out like that" I told her. "Hmm...I was surprised for a bit, Ayanokouji-kun you're very funny" Kushida told me.

"R-really?" I asked. I don't think those were her real thoughts, her true thoughts would definitely be a lot scarier than that.

"Then I'll be off" she told me. Just as she said that, both Kushida's and my phones vibrated at the same time. Even in silent mode the tone still rang out clearly, this must be important instructions sent by the school to all students. "I wonder what it is" she muttered.

Despite the various instructions we've received after starting school, this is the first time we were contacted in such a manner. This summer vacation is the first time receiving instructions like this. At the same time, an announcement started over the ship's speakers. "This is an announcement to all students, you will have received a mail to your phones earlier. Check the contents of the mail and follow those instructions closely. If you have not received the mail, please contact your nearest available faculty member. This is a very important announcement so please make sure to not miss it. I repeat---" the voice repeated the message. "...it's the mail we received just now right?". "Probably".

The message from the school arrived to both our phones simultaneously after all. The following was written on the mail in my phone:

"A special examination will be starting soon. Gather at the designated time in the designated rooms. Students who are more than 10 minutes late for the meeting will receive a penalty. Go to room 204 on the second floor by 18:00 today. Since there is only 20 minutes left until then, please wash your hands and keep your phone in silent mode or turn it off entirely."

So it's going to be a 'special test'. This is not going to be like the paper examinations we received nor a physical fitness test. Just like the island test, this is something normal schools wouldn't do. Only our school would test us in such a way. Nothing else about the exam was written. Is it something we can infer from the mail or is the exam itself still unknown. Either way, there's only one way to find out. The gathering point seems to be room 204 at 18:00. There's only 20 minutes in between. "Can I see your mail?" Kushida asks me. I show it to her. She shows me her message too, but despite the basic structure being the same, the gathering point for her was two rooms down from mine and the gathering time was 20:40 instead of 18:00. "I wonder why they'd give us such strange instructions?" she wonders. "...no clue". The only certain thing in my mind was a bad feeling I had about this.

I never expected our cruise to have this sort of exam set up, but it seems to be reality indeed. Giving us free reign to pursue movie theaters, party venues and buffet restaurants all of our own volition. I tried looking back on all that to attempt to guess the contents of this mysterious examination, unfortunately, I was unable to gather any clue. I quickly send a message via mail to Horikita and she replied to me almost instantly. "Did you receive a mail from the school just now?". "I did". "I was appointed to meet at 18:00. What about you?". "Mine's at 20:40. It looks like our gathering times are assigned differently". "I see. At 20:40 huh?" I said. The same meeting time as Kushida. I briefly wondered if they were going to split up the boys and the girls. But that can't be, I was told in my mail that the exam starts at 18:00. "I'm curious about this difference in starting times, this could give rise to a feeling of unfairness between the students of different groups". "I can't say for sure at this point". We sent messages back and forth but soon a message arrived from Horikita. "There are things I'd like to discuss further but there's no time it seems. Since your gathering time is earlier. Please make sure to report back to me" she said simply. "Got it" I replied to her. I then shut my cell phone off.

"Ayanokouji-kun?". While I was focused on chatting with Horikita, Kushida was staring at me as if to ask me what's wrong. I thought briefly whether I should tell Kushida about the same meeting time as Horikita, but it would be a bother to do so. I decided to wait and see how things played out. It should not be too late even if I acted after getting more information.

2

I received a mail from the school giving me the designated meeting point and location. 5 minutes before the designated time I arrived at my destination. Room 204 on the second floor. Students in the corridor were all shuffling into their respectively assigned rooms. I could not identify each and every one of them, but students passed by me back and forth and went into their assigned rooms. "Students from other classes, huh?" I wondered out aloud. I thought of waiting outside the room at first but thinking again, I thought the meeting might have already started inside without me and so I hurried towards the room. I gave a knock and received a quick reply. "Enter". Apparently I'd been given permission to enter, I then stepped into the room. There I saw the homeroom teacher for Class A Mashima-sensei sitting on a chair. There were two male students sitting before Mashima-sensei as well. Both were from Class D and people I recognized. "Ahh. So one of the remaining 2 from our group is Ayanokouji-dono. Kopo!". The student that let out this declaration ending with this strange onomatopoeia was none other than Sotomura. A geek-type boy from our class who is as otaku as he looks like. A person familiar with machinery and history as well as other bits and pieces of trivia although he unexpectedly is bad at communication.

"Isn't this strange, Ayanokouji?" the one who asked me that question was the one sitting next to Yukimura named Sonomura. Sonomura and Yukimura. I never really noticed the relationship between them. Looking

back I wondered how their particular friendship started. "What are you doing? Have a seat" we were instructed to sit by Mashima-sensei. As such, I sat silently beside Yukimura who himself sat beside Sonomura. The strange thing that slightly worried me was that there was another chair right beside me that was still empty. It seems to be that we were being put into groups of four students from the same class with one teacher supervising us. "There's one more person who will be joining us, we will quietly wait for them to arrive first" Mashima-sensei told us. Judging from the tone he told us this with, this person being late is not much of a problem even if we have to wait. Of course, to ensure fairness for all students, it makes sense to give us the explanation for the exam when all members of the group are gathered.

Regardless of whether it is a written exam or surviving on an uninhabited island this remains the same. However, this exam seems as though it will be taking place in this small room. What is the meaning of this, I wondered. Or perhaps I'm just worrying too much about this. In either case, I'll be getting my answers as soon as the last member of our group arrives. Sitting down in the chair, I thought there was no need for further conversation until then. Waiting for our last member, a heavy silence fell upon us. The scheduled time is already here so personally I'd like for our last member to show up as quickly as possible. The ticking of the clock was the only sound that filled the room. Soon the clock hand struck 18:00 and Mashima-sensei looked at the clock only once before a knock was heard on the door. Like in my case, the teacher told the person to enter. "Excuse me" a voice was heard as the last member of our group joined us at last. It was Karuizawa Kei who came into the room and sat down in the chair next to me.

"Eeeh...why are Yukimura-kun and the others here?" Karuizawa asked. That's what I'd like to know too. I was feeling slightly embarrassed at this point. Sonomura wasn't thinking about the situation at all but Yukimura seemed slightly strange. "I thought the mail told the students to all be

punctual, you're late" Mashima-sensei reprimanded Karuizawa. "Sorry" Karuizawa shortly replied to him. Karuizawa seemed to be dissatisfied by Mashima-sensei's words and our existence in general. My eyes met Karuizawa's for a moment and she quickly lifted her chair and placed some distance between us. Even if it's just 1mm of increased distance between us, I felt slightly depressed she hated the idea of being close to me. "Sonomura, Yukimura, Ayanokouji and Karuizawa. I will now explain the contents of the special exam" Mashima-sensei told us. I was able to somewhat guess this would be the case from the mail we received, but I was slightly curious as to what the exam itself would be.

But the team makeup of 4 students and 1 teacher was still confounding me. I had a troublesome feeling regarding this exam. "Ok, wait a minute. I don't understand what the meaning of this is, what do you mean by explaining the exam? The exam's already over right? And what are these people doing here? Isn't this strange" Karuizawa immediately shot off a barrage of questions towards Mashima-sensei. I wondered if she can't just keep quiet for a while. I thought to myself if she even bothered to read the mail properly before coming here. "I'm not going to be answering any more questions at this stage, so listen quietly" Mashima-sensei instantly responded to Karuizawa like that while glaring at her sternly. Obviously, the faculty teachers had no intention of answering such questions at this point. Mashima-sensei is seen as being a cold and strict teacher by the students, it seems this is also true of him now. Chabashira-sensei was the lenient type of teacher who taught with calmness. On the other hand, it seems like Mashima-sensei is always decisive and flat in his tone.

"In this special exam, all the 1st year students will be divided up into groups based on their zodiac signs and the entirety of the examination will be conducted in groups of students sharing the same zodiac sign like the four of you here. The purpose of the test is to assess your 'thinking ability'." Mashima-sensei explained to us. So according to the zodiac

signs, huh? So 12 groups will be formed of all the 1st year students. So Class D itself will be split into 3 groups and added to the mix of the other classes to form the required 12 groups for each zodiac sign? I thought that. And what did they mean by 'thinking ability'? If I interpret it literally it would mean it would be testing our ability to think.

"What do you mean by 'thinking ability'?" Karuizawa who was just asked to stay quiet started asking questions again. It must have been on reflex but it looks like she won't listen to Mashima-sensei's words. "I've already told you I won't be answering questions" Mashima-sensei sternly told her again. Even Karuizawa seemed to now understand the gravity of the situation as she fell quiet. Of course I gazed at her and she seemed to have a dissatisfied expression on her face. But I chose to keep quiet and listen. Yukimura and Sotomura must also be taking the situation quite seriously as they were also listening to Mashima-sensei intently.

"There are three required attributes that people who function well in society are required to master: Action, Thinking and Teamwork. These skills are necessary for you all to become successful adults. The last test on the island emphasized teamwork quite heavily, however, this one will emphasize your thinking. The ability to critically think, analyze the situation at hand and resolve the problem given will be tested in this exam. The ability to work creatively with imagination and work determinedly towards resolving the problem, such traits will become vital for this task." Mashima-sensei explained the overall gist of the exam to us. Of course, I still had several questions regarding this exam I'd like to ask him. Many aspects of the exam are still unexplained and unclear to me. "Therefore this exam will be conducted with 12 groups split up according to their zodiac signs and the exam will occur under those conditions" Mashima-sensei continued. "Are there any questions?" he finally said. "I don't understand at all, explain it in a clearer way. I get the fact that we're split up into 12 groups but why the hell am I with these

guys? Where's Hirata-kun? Where are the other girls? I still don't get the exam anyways" Karuizawa said again.

She at least refrained from addressing Mashima-sensei bluntly and added the honorifics in at the end, no matter how half-heartedly. However, I believe Karuizawa's complaints have some merit to them. The contents of the exam are still largely a mystery and a lot of the information we were given is mostly ambiguous and can be interpreted in multiple different ways. If our class is indeed split up into 3 groups there should be at least 12 to 15 people in this room and not just 4. Perhaps it's because of the size of this room and there are more groups than just 12? I wondered silently. No. There should have been rooms in this ship large enough to contain that many students, but this small room was chosen in particular. That means even though we were divided according to our zodiac signs, there must be more groups than just 12?

"Firstly, the four people here will henceforth be considered part of the same group for the remainder of the exam. There are other rooms with other students too, receiving the same explanation you are receiving now. Some of them might later also become part of your team" Mashima-sensei continued explaining. Students that could later be on the same team as us? There are only four of us in this room right now. Perhaps the remaining members are divided into several other rooms much like this one and...the purpose of the exam is to form allies between different groups of students? I wondered while Mashima-sensei continued the explanation.

"If that's the case, why don't you gather all the members here and explain it all at once. Also, why are these three guys in the same team as me? Why do I have to team up with these three disgusting boys? Honestly I really dislike the whole situation. I would much prefer to be with Hirata-kun" Karuizawa went on describing her selfish desires but it

seems Yukimura's patience with her has run out. "Shut up for a while and listen will you? It seems the exam has already started. If you say selfish things like this and our team receives a negative evaluation, will you take responsibility for it? Even back on the island, you were the weak link in the chain holding the class back. Don't hold back the class anymore than this" Yukimura coldly lectured Karuizawa on this.

"Huh? When the hell did I hold the class back, huh? You're really pissing me off" Karuizawa retorted to Yukimura. The sight of the two of them arguing overwhelmed me and Sotomura and we both fell quiet. "Both of you calm down, firstly Yukimura, your concerns are unfounded. The exam has not yet started in earnest and as such, nothing negative will happen to our team. Besides, this exam is not concerned with your attitude in the first place so you won't be scored in that aspect" I intervened quickly. "See? Now you understand, don't you?" Karuizawa looked at Yukimura proudly as if it was her victory. On the other hand, Yukimura looks at me with disappointment for choosing Karuizawa's side. But Yukimura, I had no choice but to intervene you know, I thought silently. "However, Karuizawa, you also need to change your attitude towards teachers, you know? If you keep this up, it could be a stain on your academic records and you do understand that's not a good thing right?" I gently chide Karuizawa. This time Yukimura picks his nose while laughing at Karuizawa. Mashima-sensei was staring at us like we were a bunch of elementary school children arguing with each other.

"Look here, the fact that the 4 of you are in a group cannot be rescinded no matter what. So if you want to get good results for yourselves, make sure to get along here" Mashima-sensei scolds us. "Ahh...this sucks. I can't deal with these three guys. I wanted Hirata-kun!" Karuizawa complains again. "Heh, but if the three of us work together and combine our wits we might be able to become just as good as Hirata-dono and form an ideal team for you" Sotomura says. "Huh? Disgusting. Even if there are 100 or 200 copies of you guys you all still won't be as

good as one hair from Hirata-kun" Karuizawa sharply retorts. I don't particularly care what Karuizawa thinks about us but saying something like that in front of me is still hurtful, I thought. But since Karuizawa is also sticking with Hirata I guess it can't be helped once she's separated from him like this. "I'll just call Hirata-kun and talk to him for now" Karuizawa then says.

Karuizawa gave us a glance while sighing in disgust. I thought to myself that she was going to be a troublesome partner. Most likely Yukimura must have thought the same thing as me. "If there are no more questions I will continue with my explanation" Mashima-sensei asserted. "Yeah, yeah. I understand that. But why are the four of us the only ones getting this explanation? You said there will be more members later on, why not just give the explanation then? If this is some sort of trick or harassment of students then I seriously want you to stop it" Karuizawa fired back at him quickly. "You don't need to be concerned about the small number of our group if that's what you're worried about, this is neither a trick nor harassment. It's not just one class divided up into groups but 3 to 5 people from each class being divided up into groups. We run the risk of confusing the students if the exam itself is not explained like this in advance" Mashima-sensei explained. So that's the reason this small number was gathered in this room, I thought.

The other three don't seem to have understood Mashima-sensei's explanation and were mulling it over in silence. Naturally, it's not like I could understand it instantly either. The ticking sound of the clock once again filled the now-silent room. "W-wait a minute. What do you mean we might be teaming up with groups from other classes? This is getting harder and harder to understand. Aren't other classes supposed to be the enemy?" Karuizawa asked in confusion. "I agree with Karuizawa, sensei. So far we've only been competing against the other classes. It's hard to accept that we're supposed to abandon all that and team up with them all of a sudden". I can understand Karuizawa and the others' concerns but

it's not like we students have the right to choose, the rules are determined by the school after all. "Don't think that way, Yukimura, your high school life has just started. Don't always think about competing and be more thoughtful of the future" Mashima-sensei chided Yukimura who said that. "I-I'm sorry" he replied. "Right now you don't need to think about 'understanding' but simply to 'think'. The group you are assigned to is the zodiac sign (Rabbit). Here's the list of all the members assigned to this zodiac. You will be required to return the list when you leave the room so feel free to memorize the list if you wish" Mashima-sensei explained further.

The postcard sized piece of paper was passed around between the four of us. The name of the group (Rabbit) was written as well as the names of all 14 students assigned to this zodiac. And just like Mashima-sensei said, aside from the four of us, the remaining students of this zodiac group belonged to classes A, B and C. The list was as followed:

A-Class: Takemoto Shigeru, Machida Kouji, Morishige Takuro

B-Class: Ichinose Honami, Hamaguchi Tetsuya, Beppu Ryouta

C-Class: Ibuki Mio, Manabe Shiho, Yabu Nanami, Yamashita Saki

D-Class: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Karuizawa Kei, Sotomura Hideo,
Yukimura Teruhiko

In our group there were several names I recognized from other classes. Ichinose from Class B and Ibuki from Class C. It seems we've all been assigned to the (Rabbit) zodiac group. Of course I cannot imagine what the exam will instruct us to do next, but I do somewhat share Karuizawa and Yukimura's concerns that we will not be able to work together after all that time spent competing. I peeked at Karuizawa who was sitting next to me and saw that she was also just as confused. Perhaps she was feeling misfortunate that she ended up in the same group as Ibuki. "Don't

worry, all those questions you're probably having right now, I will answer them now. I believe you will be able to understand once I have explained all that. Most likely" Mashima-sensei continued. Most likely, huh? Perhaps he had doubts about Karuizawa's ability to understand after all the complaints she'd fired at him. But he dutifully explains the reasons for this unusual grouping anyways.

"In this exam we will be completely ignoring any differences between classes A to D from the start. If you can do so too it will definitely be an easier path to clearing this exam." he explained. "Ignore any differences...what do you mean?" Karuizawa asked again. "Please just shut up for a moment, I can't concentrate on the explanation with you blabbering like that" Yukimura scolded her with an exasperated tone. "From this point onwards, you guys no longer belong to Class D but rather to the (Rabbit) group. Whether you pass or fail no longer matter on your class but on the entire 'group' as a whole now." Mashima-sensei continued. I think I'm starting to understand what this is about although I'm not certain about the bigger picture yet.

"There are four outcomes in this exam, no more and no less. Explanations regarding this have also been printed onto paper for your perusal, however, you may not take them out of this room nor photograph them. So memorize them here if you wish to" Mashima-sensei instructed. A slightly crumpled paper was paraded before us, it seems other students have already seen this paper before us as we looked through the paper. The basic rules of the exam were as follows:

Explanation of the Special Examination of Different Groups

In this test, the cornerstone will be a "target" student that is chosen from each group. By using your critical thinking skills, you will achieve one of the four possible outcomes by the end of the exam.

- 8am on the day the exam starts, you will need to mail the other groups of the fact that you have chosen a "target" student from amongst you.
- The exam itself will mostly take place between 4pm and 9pm tomorrow (students will be free to act as they wish during the day).
- For one hour each day, twice, you will need to gather together with your assigned groups and talk.
- Content of the talk will be left up to the discretion of each group.
- At the end of the exam, you will need to identify the "target" students of other groups. This will be done between 9:30 and 10:00PM. Only one answer can be submitted from each group.
- The answers must be sent to faculty members through a certain address that will be provided to your mobile phones.
- The "target" student cannot be the one to send the answers.
- You must only answer the identity of the "target" student of the group you are assigned. Any other answer will be marked as invalid.
- Details of the results of the exam will be mailed to students by 11:00PM of the same day.

Of course those were the basic rules we would need to follow for this exam. There are more detailed rules and explanations provided on the paper as well as prohibited items being listed. There seemed to be more rules and regulations than the ones we were given for the uninhabited island test. And the following are the four possible results we could get:

- Result 1: If the answers of the "target" student as well as the other group members are all correct, they will all receive private points (including members other than the "target" student themselves).

-Result 2: If there are incorrect answers or unanswered questions by people other than the "target" student, only the "target" student will receive 500,000 private points.

But before I could read any further into the rules, I noticed Karuizawa and Sotomura nodding their heads as if they've understood the contents of the exam. And Mashima-sensei who stood watching all this continued the explanation with a flat, unchanging tone.

"For instance, let's just say Yukimura, you were chosen as the "target" student of this group. That means you must be the "target" student only since only one "target" is allowed for this exam. Now, supposing Yukimura is chosen as the "target" that means the (Rabbit) group's "target" name will be written down as Yukimura. Once the choosing is complete, simply share this with the other members of your assigned group. And between 9:30 and 10:00 PM of the end of the exam everyone in the group simply needs to mail the answer "Yukimura" to the faculty. If this is done, the first outcome condition will be satisfied and everyone in the group will receive 500,000 private points as compensation. In addition, the "target" student will receive 1 million private points for successfully guiding the group to this outcome." Mashima-sensei continued his explanation.

"1-1 million? Woah...". "D-does that mean everyone gets 500,000 points and if you're chosen as the "target" you get even more...". This amount of points is something anyone in any class would want for themselves. Since the "target" student in this case will be receiving twice as much in compensation as points, they will suddenly shoot up to the top of the class in points.

"Now for the 2nd possible outcome. In the case that the identity of (Rabbit) group's "target" were to be uncovered incorrectly by the end of

the exam and the faculty were to be notified of this. Only the "target" will be receiving the points of 500,000 while the rest will go without points." Mashima-sensei explained further to us. It's strange that the exam was structured this way, the way they put it, there is not much difference between outcome 1 and outcome 2. In either case, the "target" will still be receiving a tremendous amount of points. There's no reason why anyone would deliberately sabotage their group and go for outcome 2 unless they wish to deny points to other classes and secure the points for their own class. "The position of "target" certainly is an enviable one. I'd say it's even unfair to the other members. No matter the outcome we get, they'll still have points and in the first one they even get a million points!" it seems Karuizawa wants to be chosen as the "target" student for a chance to get more points.

Of course I don't blame her. It's only natural to want to be the "target" given its privileged status. But it's too early to say yet, there are still 2 other possible outcomes yet to be revealed and there must be some trick hidden in those outcomes for such points to be awarded to the "target". "Sensei, what are the 3rd and 4th possible outcomes. You still haven't explained it to us". "Did you understand the first two outcomes? If so, I can proceed to explain the remaining outcomes" Mashima-sensei said. "Yes...I've got it. Please tell us the remaining outcomes". Mashima then told us "The remaining outcomes are printed on the back of the paper, but be sure to wait before turning the paper over". My hands froze just before we turned the paper to the other side. Mashima-sensei simply stared at us with his sharp eyes as we gradually started to understand the rules of this exam. It seems from the moment we read the instructions, the exam had already begun. "W-wait a minute, I'm not following". Although Mashima-sensei did make the rules clear to us, it seems Karuizawa is still unable to understand the instructions. Her academic abilities were not as bad as Sudou and Ike but since Karuizawa doesn't put much effort into it, it seems her ability to process information is exceptionally bad.

"Very well, I shall explain slightly more. Have you ever played the the Jinrou game before?" Mashima-sensei asked us. "Jinrou game? It was trendy for a little while so I have played it before. It's pretty interesting". I was slightly puzzled when he first mentioned the name to us. "D-don't tell me, Ayanokouji-kun. You've never heard of the Jinrou game before? Unbelievable" Karuizawa told me. Even if you think that it can't be helped, in the first place, the very concept of "games" was not something I was familiar with, neither was the concept of "playing with others". I'm not....

However, Karuizawa also seemingly realized this and instead just looked me with sad, understanding eyes. "I don't know how to put it, but not having friends is terrible, isn't it?" Karuizawa said. Instead, Karuizawa offered to explain the Jinrou game to me.

"Friends gather together and are split up into two categories: villagers and wolves. And the last survivor's group is the one that wins the game. Did you follow?" Karuizawa asks me. No! I'm not following at all, I think internally. I'm sure I'd be a god or a Buddha if I could understand it from that brief explanation. Mashima-sensei then began to explain in more detail. It goes like this:

It was an American who first invented this game called the Jinrou game. No restrictions on the number of players in the game although there is a restriction on the minimum amount of players required for the game itself. The game itself has players divided into two roles: villagers and wolves and each player must play one of these roles. There may be additional roles added but the gist of the game is that the last survivor's group wins whether it's the villagers or the wolves. Wolves mix in with the villagers and pretend to be one of them. The game itself takes around roughly two hours and in that time, the villagers need to identify which one of them is a disguised wolf and execute the the suspect. On the other hand, at

"night", the disguised wolf can 'devour' the villager. By doing this, each side can reduce the number of players on the other side. When the last survivor is the only one remaining, victory and defeat will be decided.

But I was wondering why this exam would be compared to such a game. With the currently established rules, "wolves" and "villagers" are being forced to cooperate with each other instead to aim for the most desirable first outcome. To put it simply, there is still a trick hidden in this exam that neither "wolf" nor "villager" knows of yet.

"Of course, you already know there can only be one "target" in the group. Once the identity of the "target" is revealed the third and fourth outcomes become possible for the group". "And that...is what's written on the other side of this paper...is it ok to turn it over now?". Mashima-sensei simply nods when Karuizawa asks that and together, we turn the paper over to the other side. The remaining two possible outcomes were written there. For these two remaining outcomes, the answer will be accepted by the faculty at any time during the exam period in the 24 hours. We will also still be accepting answers for these remaining outcomes 30 minutes after the end of the exam. But if there is still a mistake in the answer during these periods a penalty will apply.

-Result 3: In the case that someone other than the "target" answers the question before waiting for the allocated time and answers correctly, the class the answerer belongs to will receive 50 points each and the answerer themselves will receive 500,000 points for themselves. On the other hand, classes whose "target" have been identified will receive a penalty of -50 points for their whole class. Once this has been achieved, the test will be over for the group. However, if a member that belongs to the class of the "target" answers correctly, the previous result will be made invalid and the examination for that group will continue.

-Result 4: In the case that someone other than the "target" answers the question before waiting for the allocated time and answers incorrectly, the class the answerer belongs to will receive a penalty of -50 points each but the "target" will still receive 50,000 private points. If the answer is given incorrectly, the group's exam will end. However, if a member belonging to the class of the "target" is the one who answered incorrectly, the answer will be considered invalid and will not be accepted.

I see, so the remaining outcomes paint a more detailed picture of the exam. If only outcomes 1 and 2 were possible, the "targets" will share their answers with everyone in the group and there would be nothing to do but cooperate. However, by adding the option to "betray" one's own group, the dynamics of the exam were changed in a single stroke. If the "target" were to reveal his identity to everyone in their group, they will inevitably be preyed upon by "traitors" instantly. Since there are now more outcomes than the first one available, no one will wait that long. The traitors will immediately aim to secure points only for themselves. And the "target" themselves, in an attempt to sabotage the other classes' chances for points and increase their own class's chances, will deliberately hide their identity and try to pass off others as the "target" student. Of course, that means everybody gets less points for not 'cooperating' but in return, they will gain the chance to have the other classes penalized.

"Naturally, the school will take into consideration issues of privacy and even at the end of the exam, we will only release the results for each group and each student. The names of the "target" and the person who uncovers their identity will not be disclosed. It is possible to issue you a temporary ID if you wish. However, there need not be fear about having one's identity revealed after the exam. Of course, if you do not wish to hide your name, you can proudly display the received points too" Mashima-sensei said. I understand now, there is also the possibility that the "target" can just keep silent about their identity without revealing it to anyone else in the group and secure a lot of points that way, or share

their identity with the rest of the group and aim for the best outcome. For instance, even if Yukimura were the "target", I could theoretically pass off Sotomura or Karuizawa as the "target" to the members from the other classes and mislead them that way. That means the outcome will depend on the amount of 'goodwill' between the members. Quite a bit of investigating and misdirection will be required.

It makes sense now to compare this to the Jinrou game. But the advantage of the "wolves" cannot be said as absolute. After all, the "villagers" also have the option to mercilessly slay their targets. In fact, there is even the possibility of infighting breaking out between the "villagers" in this case. I go over the rules again in my head silently. The school has established 12 groups based on the number of zodiac signs, allocating all the 1st year students to their respective groups consisting of a certain number of people. And each group contains a mixture of students from all classes being forced to cooperate as "friends". The number of people might vary slightly depending on the group but roughly 14 people are placed into each group it seems. And in each group, there will only be one student marked as the "target" and said "target" will be informed that they are the target and they are the answer. So in other words, even if the "target" does not actively participate at all in the game their profit from this is also guaranteed. Therefore, if the rest of the members are unable to correctly identify the "target", they are the ones who will be unable to answer correctly. In other words, that is the basic gist of the exam we are currently undergoing.

The four options available to the group now are:

- Share the identity of the "target" and clear the exam together as one.
- Answer incorrectly and the group loses but the "target" still receives points.
- A traitor uncovers the identity of the "target".

-The traitor disregards the judgment of the "target".

The only difference in those options are the amount of points awarded to each member of the group. The best outcome would be for the identity of the "target" to be shared with all and wait until the end of the exam to answer correctly to receive 500,000 points each with the "target" receiving 1 million points. But the difficulty of aiming for such an outcome is extremely high. There is a possibility of being betrayed from within. Since the members will naturally want points in reward for undertaking this examination, they will betray before they get betrayed themselves.

Then if someone else answers incorrectly only the "target" will win in that case hence the other members will also prioritise finding the "target" in their own group firstly. Most of the students will likely wish to avoid taking risks by cooperating and if they cannot be convinced to work together, will most likely turn traitor within their group. Besides, it will be very difficult to aim for the first outcome if the "target" themselves simply stays silent and avoids having their identity revealed. In either case, the "target" will be receiving 500,000 points almost with a guarantee so it might as well be considered a ticket to heaven. However, there are also downsides to being given this position. Once you have been chosen as the "target" it is up to you to keep silent on this matter or share this information with others. Depending on the circumstances, there may be harassment or jealousy targeted at you from other classes or even your own class due to the preferential treatment given to the "target". There is also the danger of a traitor uncovering the identity of the "target" in which case they will no longer have to wait until the end of the exam to mail their answer to the faculty. That way, the test for the group ends immediately and the traitor gets 50 points for their own class while getting private points for themselves too. That means while sabotaging another class, one can act to contribute to both themselves and their own class. An ideal result for most students.

Of course that is the most disadvantageous position for the group as a whole to be in. In this test, the ability to 'think' is certainly a critical factor but it is understandable considering the risks associated with this exam. There are 12 groups for which 12 different outcomes will be decided. Depending on what happens during this test, a massive difference in points which cannot be bridged can easily occur. In other words, it's possible for Class A to fall down to D and for Class D to rise to A in one stroke if all goes well in this exam. I doubt this will happen here, but the very notion that it is possible in this exam amazed me. This must also be why the rules for this exam are much stricter than the uninhabited island test. "The prohibited items and actions are also listed here thoroughly so look through them too" Mashima-sensei advises.

The forbidden actions are, for instance, stealing the mobiles of other students and use of intimidation to coerce the reveal of information such as the identity of the "target" students. Mailing the answers to the faculty by using another student's mobile without permission will result in the greatest punishment for the student known as "expulsion". These are all strict conditions not present in the uninhabited island test.

Furthermore, in the case any suspicious activity is uncovered, a thorough investigation into the matter will be launched by the school to ensure no violations of the rules occur. Naturally, in the case you lie about the forbidden actions you've taken, the possibility of "expulsion" is always there. It seems everything will be monitored by the school behind the scenes. Once the exam starts, communication between students of different groups will also be forbidden for a certain period of time. To break this rule will be to risk "expulsion". The severity of these rules causes them to be embedded deep in my mind as I memorize them. "You will be meeting at 1pm and 8pm tomorrow for your group discussions. The room you will be meeting in has your group name written on a plate in front of it. Once you have entered that room, you will not be able to leave until the required time for discussion has passed. If an emergency

occurs in that time period, contact your homeroom teacher immediately. Make sure you've used the toilet before the meeting time as well." Mashima-sensei says.

"What do you mean we'll have to stay in the room? How long will we be in there?". "As is written in the explanation, the time for discussion will be 1 hour each twice a day. Other than your self-introduction to other members of your group, you may use that time however you like. Once one hour has passed, you may choose to remain in the room or leave at your discretion" Mashima-sensei continues. Does that mean all the contents of the discussion will be left up to the students to decide? "It's an annoying thing but I do understand it at least...waah I'd much prefer a fun test to this" Karuizawa says. "Once the "target" has been decided, the school will not accept any request for changes to this. In addition, any actions such as copying, deletion, transferring or alteration of mails to the faculty are strictly forbidden so keep this in mind" Mashima-sensei concludes.

In other words, altering the mail of one group for the benefit of another is absolutely forbidden. If you reverse this, then it means that the mail sent to the faculty is 100% certified to have been from the actual group. "Oi, Ayanokouji. You've been silent throughout the whole thing, are you sure you've understood it properly?". It was Yukimura who asked me that with an ambiguously worried voice from my left side. "Yeah...I got it mostly. If I have any questions I'll make sure to ask you afterwards" I tell him. "Damn, why is my group filled with such airheads?" Yukimura grumbles. Once that is done our group was told to leave and we stand up to leave the room at the same time. "Reluctantly as it may be, we are already united as one group so it is essential we deepen our unity as a team. The "target" will be announced tomorrow but why don't we stay and have a chat just the four of us?" Yukimura suggests to us. However, Karuizawa completely ignored his words as she took out her mobile and started walking away from us.

"Oi, Karuizawa. You listening to me?" Yukimura asks the departing Karuizawa. I was impressed she was able to ignore him like that, either she has a mind of steel or she has completely disregarded our existence. "Ah...Hirata-kun? There's something I'd like to ask you" it seems Karuizawa wants to complain to Hirata about us. She simply walks away from us and soon disappeared. "Damn, my group really is full of airheads" Yukimura grumbles again. I didn't bother to hide my sigh as I turned away too to return to my room. It seems our enjoyable cruise has ended and the second round of testing has begun. "This is a very troublesome thing indeed, to be teamed up with such a bitch" Sotomura starts spewing venom at Karuizawa once she left. Since Sotomura was in love with the 2D world and considers the girls in there perfect, a real 3D girl like Karuizawa would definitely repulse him. "I have to agree with you though to be honest, it seems like she'll be pulling our legs the whole way" Yukimura says as Sotomura replies "She truly is the bitch among bitches" as if to agree with him.

"In the case that one of us is announced as the "target" tomorrow morning, let's not tell each other straight away. There's no telling who's listening where. The walls have ears. Let's report to each other in a secure location". I agreed with that plan as well. It is indeed a large ship but there's really no telling who has ears where. "Although Karuizawa is gone, I'd still like to discuss the plans for tomorrow with just the three of us. Please stay with me a little longer" Yukimura pleads with us. "I must decline since I will be unable to respond to your expectations. You see, from now on, I have to go back to my room to watch the new Love Love Alive anime" Sotomura says as he instantly disappears from us almost like a ninja. Yukimura dejectedly shakes his head and sighs as if he's given up on us. Now that this is over, I'd better report this to Horikita. I'd like to know if her group received the same instructions as our (Rabbit) group and send her the details in our chat if necessary. Once I receive more information from Horikita, I can then begin to form a strategy.

Once I had returned to my room, I then struggled to sleep. I noticed a noise and looked up although I did not see my roommates Yukimura and Kouneji. However, "Sorry, did I wake you up?". It was Hirata who said that as he organized his luggage neatly while looking at me apologetically. It looked like he was preparing to leave the room since he was putting on his uniform. "No need for apologies, I wasn't sleeping anyways. Just thinking. I was about to go out for a drink anyways since I'm thirsty" I tell him. Of course, I did not mention this to Hirata, but I was on my way to check on Horikita's state. "Might I accompany you? We received the mail from the school and it's almost time anyways" Hirata says to me. The time was close to 20:30 the same time that Horikita's mail instructed her to gather for the meeting.

"It seems a rather unusual exam is about to begin, at least that's how I feel" Hirata tells me. It seems Hirata already knows what the exam will be about after hearing it from a previous student who received the explanation before him. "It's Yukimura-kun. He told me in the cafeteria earlier. About your (Rabbit) group and how everyone was receiving explanations one after the other" Hirata admits. Yukimura doesn't like Hirata very much, but he still told him because it might raise the chances of our class's success even by a little? Either way, if you know the contents of the exam before the explanation it will be easier to gather hints from the explanation itself. In this case, by cooperating with a more popular person like Hirata it can be advantageous to you. "If there's anything you've figured out, Ayanokouji-kun, please do share it with me" Hirata tells me. "I wonder about that, unlike Horikita, you or Yukimura I'm not particularly smart so I haven't been thinking much about this exam at all...in particular" I reply to him. Of course, there was no way I would tell Hirata any more than necessary.

"I was wondering why they would go to all the trouble of separating us into groups to explain the same thing to us separately" Hirata freely tells me. Indeed as Hirata says, it would be far more efficient and less time-consuming to explain to all members of a group gathered at once then separately. The school is using an obviously inefficient method, but it's most likely not just on a whim. There is more likely than not a reason behind this method. Perhaps the 'thinking ability' assessed in this exam is part of that. "I'm planning to ask sensei about it later on though" Hirata admits. I wonder if the gears will turn efficiently in this case. I wonder if Hirata, who nominally represents Class D, will be able to work efficiently with students of other classes considering all the rules we have to abide by in this exam.

4

The place where Hirata's meeting would be taking place was not as crowded as when my meeting had occurred. Still there were a few students, some were sitting on the stairs near the elevator, some were playing around with their phones and some were still speculating about the explanation they were due to receive. "I...doubt these all going to be part of my group" Hirata mutters. Even a cursory inspection showed that there were more than 10 people gathered here. They all glanced at each other while playing with their phones sometimes. Unfortunately, I was not acquainted with students from other classes and could not identify most of them. "Who's the one we just passed?". "That's Morimiya-kun from Class A. And the one near the elevator is Tokito-kun of Class C". I see. I make sure to remember the names and faces of the students from the other classes. Of course, this number is still few compared to the crowd I saw earlier this evening. When I came together with Hirata to his meeting location, several male and female students were gathered in front of the door of the meeting room. And so we approached the crowd silently.

"If I'm not wrong, you're also from the 20:40 group are you not?". The one who asked that with a low voice was Katsuragi of Class A. A calm person with a mature attitude that is hard to believe is actually a 1st year student in high school. His physique is pretty good as well. First impressions of him might be more in the range of a college student. There are still quite a few people who favour him as leader of Class A. "If so, does this have something to do with you?" a girl with long black hair answered his inquiry without any hesitation or fear. "No. But I just wanted to talk to you all since starting from tomorrow we'll be cooperating together as part of the same group" the girl that Katsuragi made this statement to was none other than Horikita Suzune. It seems Hirata and Horikita will be in the same group as Katsuragi as well. "You want to talk now? That's funny. The other day you brushed us aside when we came to talk" Horikita spat back at him. On the uninhabited island test, Horikita and Katsuragi met each other just once. At the time, Katsuragi showed little to no interest in Horikita. It seemed to be different now.

There were three other students from Class A with Katsuragi, and listening from a distance without approaching were two girls who seemed to either be from Class B or Class C. "Honestly I've never paid any attention to Class D before. But after the results of the previous exam, it's hard to stay inconspicuous, isn't it?" it seemed Katsuragi's attention has been directed towards our class. Indeed after the uninhabited island test, our class's total points had risen tremendously along with Horikita's popularity with the girls of the class. Also the number of friendship flags raised between Horikita and the other classmates have also increased along with the distrust towards Horikita decreasing at the same time. It seemed the class misunderstood Horikita's cold attitude for her silently supporting the class. Through this misunderstanding, the class began to interpret Horikita's refusal to interact with them in a different way. Also, from the perspective of the other classes Horikita started to look no longer as a student who's merely good at academics but also as a mastermind who acts to support her class while playing the other classes

from behind the scenes and it seems thanks to that she's received a fair bit of attention from the other classes as well.

"If one day you rise from Class D to Class C, remember that Class A will show no mercy before crushing you into pieces" Katsuragi warns Horikita. "That's a very petty thing to say, after all, between A and the other classes, the point gap is far too wide to bridge" Horikita counters. "Naturally but caution is required every time a class can potentially rise to a higher position. I would say the same thing to Class B or Class C". It almost sounded like Katsuragi was declaring war against Class D. But it couldn't be helped, after the last test, we would obviously be recognized as a threat. Almost as if in sync, the students around Katsuragi all gathered together to glare at Horikita in an intimidating manner. An ordinary girl would burst out crying after being glared at like that, but Horikita barely showed any reaction at all to this intimidation. Suddenly, the face of the girls around us turned into expressions of adoration as a man silently passed by us.

It was a student from Class B named Kanzaki. Although his hair was rather long for a male student, he does have a straightforward personality and does not engage much in frivolous activities. I don't know much else about Kanzaki in detail but the leader of Class B, Ichinose, seems to trust him. Having met during the island test, Kanzaki seems to be aware of Horikita's intellect and moved towards Katsuragi as if to protect Horikita from him. "You don't need to talk with Katsuragi, after all, the situation is what it is" Kanzaki said to Horikita. "Don't worry, I'm used to people looking down on Class D" Horikita counters his offer to help. "I see, someone from a class like D must be used to getting this treatment, I must admit I shared the same view towards your class as well. But the incident that happened on the island made me revise my view towards your class" Katsuragi made that remark while swiping some dust off his clothes. "But just because you got lucky and won once, I'd like you to not

get arrogant and think we're equals now" Katsuragi follows up. "...What is that supposed to mean?" Horikita asks him in response.

"What I'm trying to say is that there is a time in everyone's lives when they get lucky once and manage to close the gap a bit. But don't get in over your head just because of this one lucky incident. The difference between our class points is still a tremendous one" Katsuragi tells her. I see, it seems he's saying the results of one test won't affect the standing of the classes all that much. Of course, Horikita surely knows that as well. Since none of this was her accomplishment in the first place, Horikita was neither happy nor dismayed by his words. But it is vital that the credit goes to her in order to continue hiding my existence. "We've just started our high school life, the difference may be large, but do not forget that it is the school that arbitrarily decided who went to which class and we were distributed to those classes accordingly" Kanzaki interjected in a dignified manner. "Hirata, it looks like you're part of a rather troublesome group" I told him. "It was inevitable the moment we were grouped with Katsuragi-kun and Kanzaki-kun, I think". "No...that's not it" I muttered. "Hmm?".

"Kukuku. It looks like there are quite a lot of weaklings gathered here, let me have some fun here". It was Ryuen who said that. "Ryuen, huh?". Katsuragi lost his previously calm expression and even Kanzaki's expression changed to an alert one. "Have you also been allocated to this room? Or did you just happen to be walking by?". "Unfortunately I'm with you" Ryuen instantly replies to that question while three other students obediently walk behind him.

He almost resembled Katsuragi in that regard but the context was different. It almost seemed like a situation with a king and his servants. The students behind Ryuen had terrified expressions on their faces and moved quietly with obedient movements. "How about you put on a show for me? Beauty and the Beast could be the title" Ryuen said as he

looked at Horikita and Katsuragi respectively. Now having realized the obvious provocation, Katsuragi returns to his normal, calm self. "I originally thought our group would have students with high academic ability but after seeing you and your lackeys I can see this clearly isn't going to be the case" Katsuragi fires back. "Academic ability? What a bunch of nonsense, having academic ability won't mean anything" Ryuuen retorts.

"Hearing that from you is a shame, academic ability is the most important factor determining your future success in life and your ability to impact the future. It is even said that Japan is built on a society of academics" Katsuragi chides Ryuuen for his earlier remark but it doesn't seem to have fazed Ryuuen at all. I thought to myself that saying something like that to an idiot like Ryuuen would be ineffective. Behind him, his three lackeys obediently nod their heads at their leader's words. "I won't forget this insult". "Huh? Insult? I don't recall having done anything like that, care to refresh my memory?" Ryuuen mocks Katsuragi. "It doesn't matter, since we're in the same group we should have the opportunity to talk at length later" Katsuragi ends the conversation seeing how the explanation for their group was almost about to begin. "Hmm? Hirata-kun? And even Ayanokouji-kun? What are you guys doing here?". It was Kushida who called out to us as she approached the group with a strange expression on her face.

"Could it be that Kushida-san is also in the 20:40 group?" Hirata asks her. "Yeah. I don't understand what's going on but I was told to come here at this hour in the mail...and wow...it seems like an amazing group of people have gathered here" Kushida says as she walked around greeting the gathered students here individually. "Are you ok, Hirata? It looks like it's shaping up to be a hard one" I ask Hirata. "It's ok, I don't mind, no matter who's in my group I'll just have to do my best" Hirata as usual answered in a very positive way. Kushida may not know the circumstances but Hirata is a smart guy. Since I had already received the

explanation for this exam earlier, looking at the group of people gathered here I could more or less understand what will be happening. "Ummm...in any case it looks like something difficult's about to start?" Kushida asks. "Yeah it seems like it, you'd better prepare yourself for it" I tell her. "Ahaha...like Hirata-kun said, I'll just also have to do my best here. Also, I never got the chance to talk much with Katsuragi-kun or Ryuen-kun, I'd like to be friends with the two of them too" Kushida says towards Katsuragi and Ryuen.



"I'm not going to stay here for this stupid conversation, I'll be going ahead. It's almost time" Horikita simply shook her head and turned her back to us but not before looking coldly at Ryuen and his group. I'd like to praise Horikita on this. People with a weak will tend to lower their heads and ingratiate themselves into the group and treat themselves as the lower one in the hierarchy. Horikita, on the other hand, without

missing a beat, coldly rejected them all and remained the way she always has been. "It looks like I shouldn't have even bothered worrying" I muttered. Of course, I'm not sure how long she can keep up that attitude with the members in her group but it shouldn't be long. That's my intuition. "Good luck then" I threw a sympathetic good luck wish in Hirata's direction and decided to leave the scene.

Chapter 2: A Vast Array of Thoughts

Breakfast time. I made sure to avoid the buffet popular with the students and turned back towards the deck of the ship. On the deck there is a cafe called "Blue Ocean" where there are hardly any students. I chose to sit there in an empty table in the shade and called for the waitress. The current time is 7:55 AM. One minute just before the designated meeting time the person I was waiting for appeared before me with an empty expression. "You're here early". It was my fellow classmate from Class D Horikita Suzune. She sits next to me and one of the few people I could call a friend in this school. And she also happens to be a very problematic existence who knows a little about my true capabilities. She sat down in the seat in front of me. "I was waiting for an hour" I complain to her. Of course I was only trying to tease her a bit. "I don't care since I arrived by the designated time, even if you waited 10 hours in advance for me I couldn't care less". Ok. I suppose I can't tease her like this, it'll only end up hurting me. "...you don't want to order anything?" I ask. "No. There's no need for that. Let's continue our chat from yesterday". Horikita, who does not like idle chitchat, wanted to go down to business and seemed to want to report her situation from yesterday to me. The only thing she told me beforehand was the location of this meeting.

"So? Did the students called by the school form a group?" I ask her. "Yes. Just as you said, 12 groups with 4 possible outcomes and the "target" being announced to us today by mail at 8:00 in the morning. If there are any small differences, I suppose you could chalk it up to the difference in teachers" she told me. "Who are your group members and how many are there?" I quickly ask her. I knew some of the students from yesterday but I didn't bother telling her that. "It was quite amazing actually, almost as if it was on purpose and not just coincidence" Horikita

tells me. After telling me that, Horikita hands me a slip of paper. It seems she memorized the names of her group members and wrote it on a separate piece of paper to show me. The name of her group is (Dragon) and below were the names of her group members.

Class A: Katsuragi Kohei, Nishikawa Ryouko, Shita Shinji, Koharu Yano

Class B: Ando Sayo, Kanzaki Ryuuji, Tsukabe Hitomi

Class C: Oda Takumi, Suzuki Hidetoshi, Sonoda Masashi, Ryuen Kakeru

Class D: Kushida Kikyou, Hirata Yousuke, Horikita Suzune

First of all, it seems Hirata and Kushida were the ones chosen from Class D for this group. Two honors students to represent our class. Leaving aside the usually solitary Horikita, putting these two together on the same team would most likely form the strongest combination that Class D currently has to offer. I had expected another person to be in their group like it was with mine but seemed to not be the case. Kouenji has an overwhelming power but even if he were to be added to the group, I doubt he would be useful. Honestly I'm not sure what group he was put into or whether he even cared enough to go for the meeting. "I see...looking back I suppose this combination was inevitable" I muttered. Even if I list the names I currently know it'd be Katsuragi from Class A, Kanzaki from Class B and Ryuen from Class C. These are big names representing their classes. It's almost like a dream team in soccer terms.

"But there's also something unnatural here". If the intention is to gather the big names in one group, I felt it was unnatural that Ichinose was in our (Rabbit) group and not in the (Dragon) group. "You're worried about Ichinose-san in your group, right? Right now, only her class knows just how excellent she truly is. It's not always that the face of the class is the leader" Horikita tells me. "Are you referring to yourself?" I ask her. But I

do feel Horikita has a point. We still don't know what Ichinose is truly capable of yet. It may also be that her academic ability is surprisingly low. "From this I can somewhat understand how they've divided us up into 12 groups. Ayanokouji-kun and Karuizawa-san are very similar right? In terms of grades. Perhaps they are grouping us in terms of our current points. But the only flaw in this theory is that Yukimura-kun is also in the top grades and the same goes for Kouenji-kun..." Horikita trailed off. It seems Horikita was trying to come up with a hypothesis for the grouping by going over our mid-semester and final exam results to find a reason for the specific division of students.

"But you do have a point, me and Sotomura have similar grades as well...then there's you and Hirata". On the other hand, if we were grouped purely based on our grades Kouenji should be at the very top. Naturally, I have no doubt grades are taken into consideration, although there must be some unknown factor playing a part in the grouping as well. If possible, I would like to see the other group lists to ascertain this for myself. "In any case this is a problem, to effectively lead this group and clear the exam". Of course it was inevitable the moment all these people with excellent abilities gather in one group. And then there's the fact that Horikita's compatibility with Ryuuen is like fire and water. Horikita probably won't accept it even if I tell her this so I chose to keep quiet. However, on the contrary, I do believe Horikita will be able to work efficiently with a straightforward type of person like Katsuragi. Their way of thinking, down to the smarter person takes all, means their compatibility is high after all.

"It's about time, I wonder if the mail really will come". Once the clock hit 8:00 AM both our phones vibrated at once without even being a second apart. Immediately we both confirm the arrival of the mail. The moment I finished reading the contents of my mail, Horikita pushed her phone and the mail displayed on it towards me and I do the same to check the details of the mail while comparing it to the other's. It said the following:

After a period of thorough consideration, you have not been chosen as the "target". Please act together as one and challenge the exam in that manner. The exam itself shall begin from 1:00 PM today onwards. The exam will be held for three days from this point onwards. If you belong to the (Dragon) group please come up to the room marked as such on the second floor immediately.

The mail sent to me and Horikita were 'almost the same'. Except for the difference in the names of the groups the other words in the mail all line up perfectly. "I suppose if we were chosen as the "target" the mail would be slightly different informing us of this fact". "It seems neither of us have been chosen as the "target" for our groups. I don't know whether to be overjoyed at this or sad".

"If you're the "target", depending on your personal choices, you would be able to lead your group to any one of the four possible outcomes" I said. In other words, being the "target" student in this exam gives said student an overwhelming advantage. If you can keep up a good poker face you would easily be able to obtain at the very least 500,000 private points. "I still don't like it though. It's almost as if they're telling me I don't qualify as the "target" student" Horikita tells me. Even after being placed in a dream team lineup like her group, Horikita still thinks she's the best. I suppose that's expected of her though. "In this exam, there is a massive difference between the student selected as the "target" and the ones not selected. Since all the other students must by default struggle to uncover the identity of the "target" and there is always the possibility that the point gap between classes may be closed after the exam" Horikita says.

That's right. Of course even if Class D fails, our points will not dip into the negative. But the slight lead we gained after the uninhabited island test may shrink or disappear entirely depending on our performance here.

I also begin to internally form a strategy to approach this exam. Considering the members of my group and the mechanism by which the exam operates, the goal I must aim for becomes clear. "I don't know how the students whose names I don't even know will act, I'll need to interact directly with them for that. But I have thought of a way to get rid of them if necessary" I admit to Horikita. But it's obviously not a strategy that can be executed on the spot. It needs to first be set up and the timing needs to be perfect. But it is possible.

"I'll be looking forward to your results" Horikita finally tells me. "Me too. I'm looking forward to seeing what direction you will lead your group in" I reply to her in kind. Still, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling I had. The selection of the "target" is not random, Mashima-sensei's words yesterday only strengthened my resolve of that. There is a certain difference between the ones that would be selected and the ones that would not be selected. "In either case I'll ask you this now, but who in our group are you most suspicious of right now? Judging from the flow most of the other classes should have already gotten the same information we have" Horikita tells me. Horikita has been acting strangely ever since receiving this information, but considering who her group members are, it can't be helped I suppose. "Ryuuen" I admit to her. "What a quick answer". "Because there's no one as suspicious as him" I reply. "What about Katsuragi-kun? It's only because of him that Class A was able to secure the most desirable spot in the island test. That's also something notable. Wouldn't you say we should be suspicious of him?" Horikita asks.

"Of course that is an excellent accomplishment for a 1st year student. So if you're asking me who's the most excellent student in the group I'd say Katsuragi. On the other hand, the most suspicious one would undoubtedly have to be Ryuuen". During the island test, beyond the shadow of a doubt, Class D won. However, Ryuuen also managed to secure a slight victory in a sense. But Ryuuen, because of that fact, made

himself easy to read for me. But thinking in reverse, that also means Ryuen might now be wary of Class D as well. At any cost I would like to avoid revealing myself. He cannot know that it was thanks to me that Horikita achieved all those successes on the island test.

"While the identity of the "target" is something to be worried about after reading the mail just now I was thinking about something. Isn't something strange about the mail sent to us from the school? And the strict..." before Horikita could finish the sentence I quickly silenced her by putting my index finger in front of my lips and making a hush gesture at her. Speak of the devil, a shadow appeared before us. "Nice weather isn't it, Suzune? What are you having for breakfast?". Two people approached us while grinning. It was Ryuen of Class C and there was also another person with him. "Don't call my first name so casually, Ryuen-kun. And you, it's quite amazing you'd dare to show your face in front of us again after what you did, Ibuki-san" Horikita fires away at both Ryuen and the girl beside him, Ibuki Mio who also happens to be in my (Rabbit) group.

Ibuki seemed to be slightly provoked by this but simply tightened her lower lip without saying anything. Ryuen, on the other hand, was grinning as if he was enjoying the whole situation. In the uninhabited island test, Ibuki infiltrated our class as a spy. Eventually, Horikita discovered her and they had a fight in which Horikita received a direct hit. Horikita insisted that she lost only because she was sick during the test, although I couldn't care less which one of them was stronger. Besides, Ryuen was already ordering Ibuki to remain silent anyways while glancing at us with a condescending look. "I believe the mail has already arrived, so how was it? Did you become the "target"?" Ryuen asked. "There's no way I'd tell you, or perhaps you're going to tell us" Horikita counters. "If that's what you wish" Ryuen said as he sat down on a vacant seat nearby. "But before that please do tell me, how did you manage to achieve that result in the island test?". "I have nothing to tell you" Horikita sharply retorts.

Horikita was completely calm in her response, I could not even detect a quiver in her voice. Indeed, she possess a tremendous amount of acting skill. But Ryuuen did not seem to be provoked by her response at all. "I don't care either way, but according to her report, you didn't do anything much during the island test to allow your class to achieve those results" Ryuuen says while pointing at Ibuki. "I'm not such an idiot that someone like her would be able to figure me out. I was just saving my strength back then thanks to my fever". In response to that provocation, Ibuki immediately stood up and declared "Then let's have a rematch right here and right now, let's fight" she said to Horikita.

Horikita did not rise to that challenge, however, and simply said "I'll have to decline, unfortunately, since violent will be a violation of the school's rules for this exam. If you do happen to use violence on me, however, I will report this to the school. Please do as you wish then" to Ibuki. Ibuki angrily stepped towards Horikita after that, but stopped just shy of actually laying a hand on her. Using violence here will undoubtedly result in penalties laid upon you by the school. And most importantly, Ibuki, as one of Ryuuen's subordinates, had no right to her personal desires here. The talented Ibuki who hates Ryuuen. That was the very reason she was chosen by Ryuuen as the one to be sent to Class D as a spy in the previous test. "Since we're all here, let's have some coffee. It seems to be a good time as any to drink" Horikita surprisingly held herself together and ordered the waitress for her morning coffee. I also ordered the same coffee. However, Ryuuen seemed to show no signs of leaving and instead seemed to want to continue the conversation while silently observing Horikita. Then he finally said "From the looks of it yesterday, Katsuragi was acting quite cautious of you" to Horikita.

"Unsurprising. After all, he never would've thought that someone from Class D like me would be capable of such feats after all. Isn't it the same for you and Ibuki being here now? You're all on your guard against me

aren't you?" Horikita replies to Ryuuen. "Kuku. I'm not going to even deny it. I am indeed here to confirm your capability for myself" Ryuuen says while Horikita takes a sip of her coffee. "But you should also know that my methods are different from that Katsuragi's, besides a serious-chan type girl like yourself would definitely not be capable of formulating a strategy like the one on the island test". "I don't care either way, but how would you know what my strategy during the island test was? All that was announced were the results after all" Horikita tells him. Against a calm Horikita, Ryuuen only grinned at her. He seemed to be saying "Katsuragi doesn't know the method you used" which might as well be him saying he knows how the results of the island test were achieved by our class. "I wonder if you can explain how we did it then?" Horikita asks.



Ryuuen simply laughed before saying "At the end of the exam when the leader names were to be written, the only reason why we answered wrong was because the leader had been changed to someone else previously before the exam's end and was no longer you". "That's nothing impressive, anyone could figure something as simple as that out with a bit of thinking, even the Katsuragi you just made fun of" Horikita retorts. "No, no. He thinks you were the one that planned it all. But from my

perspective, even you shouldn't have been able to predict you'd be the leader or that you'd have to retire before the end of the exam" Ryuen tells her. "It's just insurance to prepare for the most basic of obstacles. I took everything into account the moment Ibuki-san infiltrated our class. There's nothing groundbreaking in what you just said" Horikita replies to Ryuen.

"Anyways, the important thing is that the new leader of the island test, the one who switched with you at the very end. They are the one pulling your strings from behind the scenes" Ryuen said that while looking straight at Horikita and also quietly observing me as I was standing right behind Horikita. I don't know how serious he was about that statement, but if he figures me out here he'll most definitely attack me at once. "I don't know what you're talking about, I barely have any friends to scheme with anyways. The only one I can consider somewhat close to me would be Ayanokouji-kun here but he's just been holding me back and not being much of a cooperator anyways". By drawing attention to my presence, Horikita was actually able to make me out as someone irrelevant to the grand scheme of things. "Perhaps he's the one pulling my strings" Horikita tells Ryuen. "I see". Ryuen gently looks at me once before averting his eyes.

It seems the act we put up worked and Ryuen no longer paid any attention to me. Believing he has understood my standing in regards to academic ability, physical ability and communication skills from Horikita's act. After all, such parameters can easily be used to assess someone's threat level in most cases without any misunderstandings. Apparently things did not go according to plan in this meeting but Ryuen still smiled at us without any shame or anger in his expressions. "It's a shame, when I thought I'd finally found someone who schemes just the way I like it. But it's too bad the one pulling Suzune's strings made their move a bit too early. The trump card they used in the island test should have been saved for this exam but they've ended up showing their hand too early

into the game. Suzune, if you meet the one pulling your strings later, please pass this message onto him for me" Ryuuen finally told Horikita.

"Thanks for the advice" Horikita coldly told Ryuuen. "No need for thanks". "You really think someone's pulling my strings don't you" Horikita asks him. Ryuuen did not answer her question. He must have no doubts about his conviction even though there was no proof or confirmation from Horikita's side. After all, the man named Ryuuen believes in himself above all else and does not look like the type to accept someone else's advice. He seemed to have taken this failure in stride and just seemed to find fun in chatting with Horikita. Suddenly, Ryuuen whipped out his phone without warning and before anyone could react, quickly snapped a photo of Horikita without her permission. "Don't take my photo!" Horikita tells him sharply. "Don't say things like that, I'll tell you something good" Ryuuen says while looking at the photo of Horikita he'd snapped in his phone. "There is someone else in Class D who's scheming other than you" Ryuuen gives Horikita a hint. "That's a good thing, instead of asking me for everything they should be able to make their own decisions" Horikita fires back. "In any case, I'm glad I got to talk to you, Suzune. Remember, this is a game. I'll definitely find the one sneaking around in the shadows. Everything is a target for me" Ryuuen tells her.

"Let me just ask one last thing. I understand being cautious of me, but why obsess over me so much? Aren't there others you care about? Like Ichinose-san in Class B or Katsuragi-kun in Class A and then there's the person known as Sakayanagi according to the rumors. There should be guys above Class C you'd normally worry about. You said you'd tell me something good so answer me that much at least" Horikita asks Ryuuen the reason why he focused so much on Class D. "It's because I already know more or less their capabilities and none of them are capable enough to be my enemies. If I wanted to crush them, I could crush any of them whenever I want" Ryuuen boldly said. "How about the rumored Sakayanagi?". The person who asked that question was not Horikita but

rather Ibuki. It looks like Ibuki herself wanted to confirm this fact with Ryuuen. And Ryuuen, who spoke ever so smoothly until now, waited for a while before replying. "I'm saving that woman last for dessert. It'll be a waste for me to eat Sakayanagi now" he said at last. Ryuuen then stood up and together with Ibuki, left our table.

"Are you perhaps dissatisfied?" I ask Horikita once Ryuuen had left. "No. I have no such sentiments. I simply disliked the way you handled the situation. In the first place, on our path to Class A, I was the one supposed to be drawing the attention and not you" she said in reply. "That may be the case, but this guy Ryuuen. He's an unpredictable one". I thought to myself despite what he showed us earlier, Ryuuen already suspected me somewhat in his mind. Of that there is almost no doubt. I, of course, don't know what Ryuuen is thinking. But the timing with which he appeared here was nothing short of dangerous. "It could've been he was spying on us from the start, but the timing with which he appeared was too good". Perhaps Ibuki is involved in this. The very fact that Ryuuen brought her to the meeting with us should mean we need to assume she would attempt to gather information on us in our group as well.

"I doubt anybody actually suspects you're the one working behind the scenes. The reputation you've built up throughout the semester as an 'ordinary' person will be very hard to shake" Horikita tells me. I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment or an insult but it is true that no matter how much one investigates me, they are bound to find nothing special. Normally no sane person would deliberately lower themselves to such mediocrity the way I have so I should be more or less safe from Ryuuen's scrutiny. However, the very fact that I'm close to Horikita should put me on a to-watch list of his. Also, the fact that Ibuki is in the same group as I am means I'll be under some measure of surveillance. Once I saw students starting to come out onto the deck I got up from my seat.

"The discussion's over for now, right? In that case, I'm going to back to my room to sleep" I told Horikita.

"Yes, for now there's nothing left to discuss. All we have left to do is proceed in our own groups. Good work for today. Do make sure to report if anything comes up" Horikita tells me as I leave. At least I've seen that when faced with adversity, Horikita has shown a willingness to fight back. But regardless of personal compatibility, Hirata and Kushida should be able to rein her in. I suppose I'll go back to my room and sleep until afternoon. Despite the fact that the exam has officially begun, there's nothing to do until then anyways.

1

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Geppu, geppu. If you eat three heavy meals for lunch you'd naturally be full. I thought of going on a diet but it seems like a failure". Sotomura came up to me while rubbing his belly that had swollen up from all the food he'd eaten earlier. It conveyed a completely different image from someone who claimed to want to go on a diet. He came to the location me and Yukimura were waiting in front of. "It is troublesome that the exam has started, I've barely eaten". "Is that a 'I'm currently unable to use my full strength' flag?". "...I've been wanting to say it for a while now, but can't you cut it out with that weird way of speaking?" Yukimura retorts to Sotomura. Of course, from the perspective of someone who doesn't quite understand Sotomura, his words may seem almost like witchcraft. But you just have to get used to it, I guess. On the contrary, sometimes talking in an unusual manner like that can be interesting. But if I speak out now, I might incur Yukimura's wrath and so I let him continue on with his tirade. "Pofu~ Did you not like my way of speech? What would suit you then, Yukimura-dono?". "Just speak normally" Yukimura replies to Sotomura.

"Ok, from this point onwards I'll be the weakest, strongest protagonist. I'll normally have no motivation to do anything but the truth is, I have a power capable of destroying the world worthy of naming me Cheat-kun. As is the current trend". Yukimura, having given up on convincing Sotomura, simply starts walking ahead of us. Since we were slightly late, we started walking in a hurry towards our destination. "Ayanokouji, there's something I wish to ask you, answer me". He's speaking in a tone befitting a protagonist type character. "What would you like to ask?". "I was wondering what your favourite type of dialect is, since you'd surely be happy if a cute heroine were to speak in such a dialect". The way he said it itself sounded cool, but the content of the dialogue was always the same with him. "No...there's no particular dialect I like". Since I was born and raised in Tokyo, there's no way I would know about such dialects. "Have you not yet had the chance to experience the dialect of 'moe'?" he asks me. Just how many students in this school does he think possesses the attribute of such a dialect? I could just shut him off now but until we reach our designated meeting room I suppose I could kill some time by talking with him. "Do you have a favourite dialect?" I ask him.

"Of course, I'll tell you via my own ranking system for dialects. In third place would have to be the Kansai dialect. It gives off a strict yet rough impression. Second place would be the dialect of the beauty in the snow, the Hokkaido dialect. The use of the dialect in the 2D world is also widespread so it's a surekill moe dialect. I did say I wanted to kill time by talking with him, but none of this made any sense to me. But before I could reply in any manner, Sotomura started whistling a strange onomatopoeia sounding like 'doururururururu'. "The number one in my dialect ranking would have to be the dialect that lolis to Onee-sans all use in a versatile manner, the Hakata dialect. It's said to be the ultimate dialect with a wide variety of slangs. These three dialects are my best 3" Sotomura continues on. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand what he wanted to tell me although I did realize he was quite passionate about the subject. But it seemed it at least succeeded in killing time since by the time we finished the conversation we had arrived in front of the

designated meeting room with the name of our group (Rabbit) written on a plate in front of it on the second floor. Since the exam was already underway, students crowded the corridor and gave me a sense of claustrophobia.

"Playtime ended yesterday. From here on out, expect to fight for yourself and for the sake of your class". Yukimura mainly directed those words at Sotomura, but I also nodded at him in acknowledgment. "Haaa...no matter how many times I look at it this is a sorry team I have". That statement came from one of the girls who entered the room, looked at us and sighed. It was one of the pretty girls of Class D (although a bit gaudy). Karuizawa Kei. Including her, 11 people were currently in our room sitting in chairs arranged in a circular formation. Given the number of chairs still left empty, I thought we were probably the last ones to arrive. I wouldn't be able to identify them from the list alone but there were several students besides Ichinose and Ibuki in the room that I recognized. There was a male student from Class A who approached me during the island test to propose an alliance to sabotage Class D. But I don't recognize most of the other male and female students in the room. It seems like we, who were rivals just yesterday, were going to be forced to cooperate in this exam.

Naturally, it's not only our class but the other classes that were also feeling confused and awkward from this sudden arrangement. We opted to sit in the chairs since standing would just make us stand out even more. Students almost instinctively sat in groups based on classes, but Karuizawa and Ibuki both sat further out from the circle of students almost as if they were both isolated from the group. "Hmm...what's wrong?". "Did you notice something, Ayanokouji?". "...no. It's nothing". I had thought Karuizawa would confront Ibuki the moment she saw her. After all, it was Ibuki Mio in front of us who was responsible for stealing her underwear back on the island test. I thought she'd go for revenge immediately, but perhaps Karuizawa is more mature than I expected, or

was it that she'd finished with her revenge already. In either case, the fact that Karuizawa did not even seem upset was unnatural. But before I could voice those questions, an announcement came from the onboard speakers installed in the rooms of the ship. "From this point onwards, we will begin with the first group discussion". Just that. A short announcement, but since no one in the group from different classes know each other well, there was no one willing to take the initiative in starting the discussion.

As such, an awkward air came over the room. Then, the girl named Ichinose Honami stepped up with a glowing smile and after confirming that no one else would be taking the initiative. Spoke. "I do know most of the people here, but I suppose in accordance with the school's instructions, we should introduce ourselves firstly. Since there are also people who might not know each other yet" she spoke to the group. It's definitely not easy being the leader of a group like this, one must be able to inspire students, some of whom might even be from opposing classes, and bring them all together as one to clear the exam. But Ichinose didn't seem to dislike it, in fact, she seemed to be having fun leading the group. Some students from Class A could not hide their surprise at her unexpectedly taking the lead. "I don't think there's any need for that. The school's just saying it as a formality. Only the ones who want to introduce themselves should do it" it was Machida who said that to Ichinose. "If Machida-kun doesn't wish to do it, then I certainly can't force you to. But there may be a recorder hidden somewhere in this room. If we blatantly disobey the instructions from the school, it may not just be you but the whole group that gets punished, you know?" Ichinose quickly replies to Machida. Basically, being selfish here may cost the entire group. Putting it like that, she made it so even the guy named Machida from Class A cannot help but accept her reasoning.

She then started the self-introductions by introducing herself. I think back to the first day of high school and how I messed up my self-

introduction back then. But when my turn to introduce myself to the group came, it ended up being the same, dull and monotonous introduction as that day. "Yaa~ho Ayanokouji-kun. It seems we're in the same group. Let's get along" Ichinose called out to me with a friendly and consoling voice as I get back to my seat. Once everyone's self-introductions were over and done with, Ichinose once again stepped up to speak. "So, we've done as the school instructed. How would you guys like to proceed from now on? If any of you object to me being the leader, would you please tell me so?". Ichinose spoke in a tone as if asking if anyone would like to take the leadership position from her. Of course, saying it in a way like that ensured that no one would ever wrest the leadership spot from her. There may be students among us who are not satisfied with the way Ichinose does things, but fearing the possibility that the responsibility of leadership would be thrust on them, none would speak up now.

"Since no one would like to take the leader spot, can I proceed? Firstly, I believe we should discuss aspects of the exam some don't quite understand yet, or any other questions and concerns you might have regarding it. Otherwise, this ambiguous situation will continue on as it is" Ichinose said as she proposed the first topic of discussion. There was no resistance from the group to her suggestion and there were no hands or voices raised against her. Things like that can often happen when strangers gather together as a group and the fact that one can act without fear of such opposition is the mark of a true leader. Ichinose then put her hands on her hips and smiled resolutely. "I'd like to ask everyone here something and I'm going to ask everyone assuming that no one here is the "target". I'd like to ask if everyone here would like to work together to clear this exam through outcome 1. I'd like to ask you if you all think this is the best course of action or not?" Ichinose asks us. "Huh? What do you mean? Isn't that obvious?" Karuizawa was the one who replied to her question. She acted like she understood yet more likely than not she didn't, but in a situation like this, the first one who speaks their mind can decide their place in the group hierarchy, whether it be superior or inferior. Yukimura, and a girl from Class C named Manabe also seemed

to realize this, replying in the same manner as if to be in sync with Karuizawa. Obviously, if at all possible, it makes sense everyone here would want to aim for the first possible outcome.

As if to agree with Ichinose's statement, one of the male students from Class B raised his hands. If I recall, the name he gave during his self-introduction was Hamaguchi Tetsuya. "I agree with her, of course, cooperating with each other as a group is the obvious course of action here" he said. It wasn't a bad question to start the discussion out with, I must admit. It seems quite a few of the students haven't noticed it yet, but by asking a seemingly casual and obvious question like this, it may be possible to discern who is not the "target" while fostering a positive attitude amongst the members of the group. If one plays it right, they may even be able to narrow down the list of suspects for the "target" at this stage. It might still be difficult to decide black or white for certain with this one question. Ichinose, the one who asked the question. Karuizawa, who first answered her. Then Yukimura and Manabe who followed up on Karuizawa's answer. And Hamaguchi of Class B. It wouldn't be surprising if the "target" were among them and boldly answered the question without missing a beat.

I went along with them so as to not ruin the atmosphere they had right now. "We're a group after all, and our private points are all low right now anyways, I'd like to cooperate if possible. How about Sotomura?" I ask. Sotomura, whose stomach seems to now be in pain from eating too much, was rubbing his belly when I called out to him all of a sudden, causing his shoulders to jump in surprise. "Of course, I'll also cooperate since I get points from doing so too" he replies. It seems Sotomura is still trying to keep up his cool, mysterious character act. And observing all of us, were the students of Class A who only consisted of male students.

They seem to be calmly observing us to see what direction the group's discussion will take. "Ichinose, that question is unfair isn't it? If you're not the "target" by saying that, you manage to gather the entire group up as one against the "target", and there's no one who would blatantly disagree with you and declare themselves as a traitor after your statement. It's almost like you're painting the "target" as the bad one for not speaking out, I believe this is a very inappropriate question you've asked us". It was Machida who told that to Ichinose in a stern tone of voice.

He seems to be clearly different from the students of Class D and Class C who simply went along with the flow and agreed with Ichinose. It almost seemed as if this were an interrogation and he was watching and criticizing Ichinose's words. Hamaguchi, having heard Machida's complaint, replied to him calmly "Isn't this a reasonable question for this sort of exam? Ichinose-san did not use any sort of threat to force us to cooperate or divulge information, if you don't want to all you have to do is stay silent". Hamaguchi quickly puts a stop to Class A's criticism of Ichinose. It seems civil war is breaking out amongst the group already, Machida was not surprised at all by Hamaguchi's retaliation, almost as if he'd already expected this would happen. "Indeed, we have the right to remain silent. And as such, that is what me and the rest of Class A will be doing, keep our silence". Machida bluntly rejected Ichinose's offer to cooperate. And the remaining Class A students follow his lead. And following their lead in turn, the remaining students who have not yet answered also chose to keep silent. "Perhaps I came on too strong with that question?". In response to this unexpected rejection, Ichinose smiled bitterly.

"No, Ichinose-san. Your question was perfectly reasonable. But I suppose their wariness was slightly stronger than we expected. Tell me, then, Machida-kun. What questions here would you consider appropriate? We could talk about our favourite foods and hobbies, but I doubt the exam will cover anything of the sort. That would mean you

have nothing to offer the group except your silence" Hamaguchi tells Machida. "Nothing else to offer? No such thing" Machida tries to respond. "I myself do not know what Ichinose-san intended with that question, but in this exam, I know that discussion between students is vital. In the case that you still refuse to keep your silence, we will have no other choice but to continue our discussion without Class A in it. At the very least, you could help us decide what topic we should start the discussion on" Hamaguchi retorts to Machida. Hamaguchi is right, exactly as he said, just by keeping silent you won't get any closer to finding the "target" or clearing the exam. Machida should know this as well, despite him crossing his arms and keeping silent. Seeing the situation as a castle gate closed shut, Ichinose tries to break through.

"In that case, although reluctant, I guess we'll have to decide the leader with a majority vote. There will undoubtedly be suspicion directed at the ones who refuse to answer the question and we can name the "target" later. Would everyone be ok with that?" Ichinose broke through the castle known as Class A with those words. Horikita also thinks similarly to Ichinose, but the difference between them is that Ichinose is easily able to rally the people around her to her side. To fight a battle while receiving the approval of the people around you makes her a very powerful presence in this situation. Frankly, Ichinose already holds the majority vote in her hands the moment she took the initiative in the discussion. As far as I could tell, no one else in the school is capable of doing the same thing she does. Katsuragi and Ryuen would not be able to do what she did. Hirata and Kushida would not be able to do it either.

"...Are you threatening me?". "Don't get me wrong, we just want to discuss things with you all. You're free to decide for yourself what you wish to discuss and what you wish to not discuss. But I would like people to participate in the discussion at this stage, since it is a required condition in this exam". Machida seems to not comprehend her words and starts muttering to himself strangely. "This exam, can it really be

resolved just by talking? Do you really think we'll figure out the "target" just by talking with each other? Or are you going to lower your head and beg them to reveal themselves?" Machida finally tells Ichinose. I see, it looks like Class A's approach to this exam has already been decided, but this approach doesn't seem to be Machida's. I think I'm starting to see the man acting behind Machida. "So, is there another way?". Ichinose asks Machida, having full confidence in her approach. But of course, this is something Class A already expected her to ask. "...Yes. There is a way to easily and definitively clear this exam". One of the students from Class A suddenly spoke up. Both Ichinose and Hamaguchi could not conceal their surprise at this. "...could you explain your strategy to us?" she asks them. "Sure. We are a 'group' after all so it's natural to share such information". Machida, no, the whole of Class A came up with an extremely simple strategy. "The strategy we came up with is...to not talk at all from the start of the exam until its finish" he said at last.

He said it loud enough for us, sitting on the sidelines of the discussion, to hear as well. It seemed both Karuizawa and Sotomura also understood what he meant to say. "Now that's a pretty unique proposition, but how do you propose to clear the exam without any discussion at all. Or are you suggesting we let the identity of the "target" remain completely hidden to the end?". Instead of Ichinose, it was Hamaguchi who cut in and spoke out. "Indeed, the real shortcut to clearing this exam as efficiently as possible is to do so without talking to each other at all." Machida said in reply. "I can't believe this. This is starting to make us think that the "target" student is among the students of Class A and this action is being taken to help protect their identity while sharing information amongst your classmates only." Naturally, if the "target" is already in your class, there's no need to talk to anyone else nor participate in any discussion. It can't be helped that Hamaguchi would be suspicious of them after that. Not only Hamaguchi, but it can't be helped if everyone else suspects them after that.

"No. It doesn't matter what class the "target" is in, it won't affect the outcome. If we simply do not talk to each other we can win, that is the strategy that Katsuragi-san devised for us". "Katsuragi-kun?...I see" . Ichinose seemed to understand too the moment she heard Katsuragi's name being mentioned. Machida then turned towards Yukimura, who did not seem to understand his explanation, and began to explain his strategy. "There can only be four possible outcomes in this exam. I believe you have already been briefed on them all. What do you think is the outcome we should all aim to avoid in this exam?" Machida suddenly turns towards Karuizawa and asks her the question. "Ehhh...the outcome where someone figures out the "target"'s identity and betrays the group?" she replies. "Exactly, the moment a traitor emerges we lose as a group. Whether the traitor answers correctly or incorrectly, both paths lead to a loss. But, thinking in reverse, what about the other possible outcomes?" Machida looks towards Yukimura for an answer.

"The other possible outcomes? An outcome where a negative result does not occur?". "Indeed, there are no demerits in either of the remaining two possible outcomes. The class points will neither rise nor fall drastically, and in addition we gain a tremendous amount of private points as well. The only loser in this scenario would be the faculty. There is no need to find the "target" student. By discussing amongst ourselves, we will only end up suspecting each other of hiding the "target" and end up slipping up somewhere and make a mistake".

"We do recognize the soundness of this strategy to a certain extent, however, as long as we don't know which class the "target" belongs to, there is always the possibility that the point gap between the classes may widen further. If the "target" belongs to a certain class and ends up favouring that class, said class may gain millions of points in the form of private points. Although the class point itself will not be affected, I'm sure everybody understands the impact a difference in private points can make for a class." Hamaguchi counters Machida's points.

Hamaguchi is right, private points are also extremely useful. One can buy test scores, for instance, or even change classes depending on how one chooses to use them. Hamaguchi is correct in assuming that the "target" may choose to favour their class to use those private points in such a manner. But this argument won't work against Class A, after all, Katsuragi must have already realized the "trick" hidden in this exam. They would not have boldly proposed this strategy to us otherwise. "Think about it carefully, the school would definitely not give any class an unfair advantage in an exam like this. To the point they emphasized their impartiality before the exam's start during the briefing. Of course there's no denying the fact that there is only one "target" in each group but that is not important. The important thing is that every class has an 'equal' opportunity to have the "target". There's no denying the fact that in this exam, both Class A and Class D would start equally at the same starting line" Machida says. For those advocating Katsuragi's strategy, they would naturally insist that there would be no discussion and allow points to be equally distributed amongst the classes regardless of which class the "target" belongs to.

But Hamaguchi responded to Class A's unexpected proposal promptly. "I admit the school made sure every class starts out equally in fairness. And if you take their word for it, certainly you're train of thought is not wrong. But, we cannot be certain of that fact yet". It was the hard truth, but Hamaguchi did his best to voice it anyways. The school would certainly try to avoid bias by not assigning the "target" student to specific classes. That much would be easy to guess for anybody. "I believe you understand as well, but by talking amongst each other now, we will only create suspicion and doubt and could cause a breakdown in our group relationships. There is indeed the possibility that you will find the "target" this way, but you also run the risk of a traitor emerging and causing the group to suffer for their own sake." Machida continues.

"You're right, it's not a bad thing if we all profit while having the school lose out in the process" Ichinose says as she accepts the strategy Katsuragi devised for the exam. Machida was looking at us with a face that seemed to be saying he was the one who proposed the logical course of action, but it doesn't seem like Ichinose is willing to meekly accept their strategy. "But to execute that strategy will be difficult, perhaps even more difficult than if we simply talked with each other. I will not talk, I will not doubt and I will not betray. Unless every student here can abide by that, that strategy is pointless. Since the school already guarantees anonymity for the students, trust between each other also becomes an issue. It would be great if the points can be equally distributed between all of us at the end, but couldn't there also be a risk of someone breaking that trust and taking the points for themselves?". In that case, one student in one class would get the points for themselves while hiding it from the rest of the class. It would indeed bring about an awkward atmosphere.

It seems like Katsuragi's plan is to stick to defense, almost as if building a barrier for the group. That is his strategy. Getting cooperation from everyone in the group would surely be difficult, but the strategy itself only requires one to not talk at all, a simple tactic that everyone can easily abide by. It can almost be said to be a strategy that overturns the school's plans and renders the exam moot in the first place. "Isn't this fine? I don't see any problems in this. Once the exam is over, we can simply talk amongst each other in our classes and share the points from the exam". Sotomura's sentiment seems to be shared by students from Class C as well, since the girl named Manabe also agreed with him.

"I agree too, as long as we can share our points after the exam is over that's fine. Better that than to run the risk of a traitor emerging and sabotaging the group, it's not realistic too to try and figure out the "target" simply by talking to each other". Yukimura seemed to be deep in thought as he said that, but even he raised no objections against the strategy. Sensing that the opposition has died down, Machida slightly laughed. "I

see, indeed as Machida-kun says, the problem can be resolved after the exam in each class, hmm?" Ichinose says with her arms crossed as she looks at her own class, then at Class D and Class C.

"I'd like to get a consensus from the group, would that be ok? If you agree with the strategy, please raise your hands" she then says. Yukimura and Sotomura from Class D as well as some students from Class C wavered at that, but after a while, although scattered, they raised their hands. "Ibuki-san, how about you? May we hear your opinion too?" Ichinose then asks Ibuki. "I don't have any opinion in particular, there's nothing happening now anyways so continue as you want". It doesn't seem like Ibuki wants to give anything away at this stage. She's clearly different from the other three students from Class C.

Since Manabe and the others didn't seem surprised by it, this seems to be Ibuki's usual attitude. "I see, that's your idea then. How about Karuizawa-san?" Ichinose asks Karuizawa.

"Really...I'm irked by this whole thing. Whether we get points, or I get points is a different matter. It's not like we're guaranteed to get points by talking to each other right?...I'd just like this exam to be over quickly so I can go back to having fun" she said. Despite Karuizawa just speaking her thoughts, it seems her words resonated with quite a few other students as well.

"Then what about Hamaguchi-kun?". "We will leave our decision to Ichinose-san" he quickly replies to her. It seems the trust towards Ichinose from her class is unshakeable as the other two students from Class B also nodded in agreement. "Thank you, then lastly, what about Ayanokouji-kun?". Ichinose then turns to ask me, the last one who hasn't given their opinion yet. "I think the strategy's just fine, besides, the majority have already agreed with it anyways. And I'm the type who's bad at talking anyways". I said that in favor of Katsuragi's strategy. But...it

doesn't seem like Ichinose will simply accept Katsuragi's proposed strategy obediently.

Or rather, if they simply bow down and accept the flow of things here, Class B's future would be a dark one indeed. Because in Katsuragi's strategy, there is an element of it that's hard to agree with. "It's decided then" Machida speaks out.

"Wait. Machida-kun's...no Katsuragi-kun's strategy is certainly not a bad one, there'd be no need to doubt anyone, hunt anyone or hurt anyone. I can understand why everyone would want to follow this strategy. It's hard to see any demerits in this strategy, but if you think about it carefully, isn't it because you're from Class A that you are able to propose such a strategy? There is a demerit that we cannot see hidden in this strategy" Ichinose then says. Ichinose made a comeback that almost seemed like a sunken submarine suddenly emerging from the sea with a splash. "A hidden demerit? What would that be?" Yukimura asks Ichinose with a voice that sounded like he hadn't thought of it that far.

"Indeed, assuming every class has an equal chance of having the "target" assigned to it, not talking to each other is the best way to obtain a large amount of points for all of us. There are only advantages to this strategy in that case. However, it would be unfair to the lower classes to let this one chance go to waste" she explains.

"T-that's!....". "We still don't know how many special exams will occur before graduation. And the current difference Class A has from the other classes is remarkable. The strategy of working together with other classes was brought up during the island test as well. In other words, every time there is an exam, Class A will keep on using this strategy causing the final position of the classes to be unchanged at graduation" Ichinose explains. Yukimura's face immediately tightened at that explanation, as if wondering how he did not notice such a simple thing. Machida had worded his proposition so cleverly that everyone's attention

was focused only on avoiding a "loss" that they did not consider anything else. That was why even Yukimura was quick to accept it without considering the long term result of it.

"Even if we can surely gain points this way, I cannot overlook such a valuable chance" Ichinose concludes. "Looks like Ichinose-san's made her decision, we will follow her lead" Hamaguchi then says.

"Wait a minute, Ichinose. I know what you're trying to say, but if we act according to your proposal instead, there's only one possible outcome. But even if we all cooperate together, all classes will get the same amount of points. The outcome you wish for will not occur. Or are you trying to figure out the "target" through discussion and Class B will betray us to get all the points in one stroke? You deliberately asked everyone if they desire the first outcome just now. But I don't think you're trustworthy" Machida counters.

"You say the gap between the classes won't change either way. But that's wrong. Look at the number of students from each class. 4 from Class D and C. 3 from A and B. Either way the amount of points each class will receive will change and the gap can change too, right?". "Indeed, but will you and Class B with fewer numbers accept this outcome? Are you saintly enough to sacrifice your class's standing to help the lower classes rise?" Machida asks Ichinose.

"If not, Class A will certainly stand to benefit from the current strategy. It would be especially troublesome if the "target" happened to be in Class A after all." Of course, if the "target" is not in Class A then there would be no need for Ichinose to be this aggressive. However, as long as that possibility exists, she would insist on the necessity for dialogue. "I agree with Ichinose-san too, we cannot allow Class A to gain the lead with this strategy" Hamaguchi follows up. I was impressed the first time I heard the Katsuragi faction's strategy but now that Ichinose and Hamaguchi have pointed it out, it now sounds more like a bluff than anything else.

Something that was planned the moment they were briefed on the nature of the exam.

I suppose it's only because she knows Class A's methods that she was able to counter their arguments like this. Even the students that once stood in favour of their strategy would probably now be neutral or perhaps even stand on Ichinose's side. The battlefield has now turned into Class B led by Ichinose and Class A led by Machida while D and C are the classes being fought over by them and could be swayed to either side. And now the tide will turn in favour of Class B. "I see, then you've made your decision too. Just remember we of Class A have already made our choice. For whatever reason it may be, we will not talk to you henceforth. You all are free to discuss whatever you wish amongst yourselves" Machida finally says and with that the three students of Class A moved over to the corner of the room in silence.

It appears they'll be spending the rest of the allocated time like that.

I'm sure the other Class A students are doing the same thing in the other groups right about now as well. By doing this, if the "target" happened to be from Class A, it would be exceedingly difficult to find them. "Now, what should we do?" Ichinose faces the remaining three classes and asks. "I hate to be the one excluding you guys, but if that's your class's decision it can't be helped. If you wish to join our discussion, please say so anytime" Ichinose directs those words at Class A.

Ichinose did her best to call out to Class A like that, but it seems they've already made up their mind. Class A remained silent and did not reply at all. "Isn't it impossible to find the "target" without the cooperation of Class A?". It was Yukimura who asked that question as if in complaint to Ichinose. His attitude was now completely different to only a while ago when he was ready to go along with the more convenient strategy of Class A, but I suppose Yukimura wants to keep Class D as an active participant in the discussions. "Yes, if the "target" is in Class A it would be

rather difficult to pinpoint them. But I would say probability is in our favour in a 3 to 1 ratio. Even if we don't know the "who" if we know "where" it will be easier on us at least, wouldn't you say?". Ichinose doesn't seem to want to find out exactly "who" the "target" is as much as she wants to know which 'class' they belong to, especially if they are in Class A.

"It can't be helped that they refuse to talk. And if the "target" is in one of the remaining three classes, I will have treated them horribly. But if the "target" is in Class A, I'd like to discuss what we should do after that". Ichinose struck back boldly against Katsuragi's strategy by forming an alliance between the three remaining classes. "...I still can't trust you". It was Yukimura who spoke out against Ichinose now. Manabe from Class C also seems to agree with Yukimura.

"Even if the "target" is in Class A, wouldn't it be hard to identify them?". "I don't think we need to think ahead that far just yet, right now, narrowing down the class to which the "target" belongs should be enough, isn't it?" Ichinose replies. If you look at it from the perspective of the "target", the idea of three classes joining hands to locate them would be terrifying. "This is just my proposition at the start of the discussion. If we continue our dialogue, surely better ideas will appear. I mean, the exam's just begun. We can take our time deciding whose ideas to use or not" Ichinose continues. To begin with, no one could've argued against either Machida's idea or Ichinose's idea since no one has anything else to offer. As Hamaguchi said, it wouldn't be fair to them to reject their proposal without having a better one to offer. For now, I shouldn't rush things without first ascertaining how the others will act. After all, people with a low communication ability tend to get dragged with the flow in situations like this.

"You're Karuizawa-san, right? There's something I want to ask you" the girl from Class C named Manabe called out to Karuizawa. Karuizawa herself didn't seem to be expecting her name to be called out here, and she quickly turned away from her phone. "What?". "Perhaps it's just my

misunderstanding, but over the summer holiday, did you have a quarrel with Rika?" she asked.

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean? Who's Rika?" Karuizawa asks. "She's from our class. The one wearing glasses? She wears her hair like a dango? You don't recall her?" Manabe replies to her. "I don't. You've got the wrong person". Karuizawa brushes them off as if they had nothing to do with her and glanced back towards her phone. But Manabe's next words caused a change in Karuizawa's expression. "Isn't it strange, then? We heard a different story. That Class D's Karuizawa bullied our Rika. That she was waiting in line at the cafe and you pushed her out of it" Manabe says. "...I don't know what you're talking about. Do you have a problem with me?" Karuizawa replies.

"Not really, just checking. If that's true, I want you to go apologize to Rika. Rika's the type to keep quiet over matters like this, so it's our job as her classmates to stand up for her" Manabe says. It looks like it's not just our class, Karuizawa has a reputation as a troublemaker in other classes as well. I turn my eyes away from them. After all, even Class C can be a pain to deal with. Karuizawa also tries to ignore them but it seems to have made Manabe angry.

Manabe then takes out her phone and points the camera towards Karuizawa. "Then you won't mind if I check again with Rika, will you? If you didn't do anything, then you surely won't have a problem with that right?". And at that moment, Karuizawa suddenly stood up and grabbed the phone from Manabe's hands. She used quite a bit of force as the phone flew through the air and fell down to the floor with a thud. "What the hell are you doing?!" Manabe shouted at Karuizawa. "That's my line, don't take photos of me without my permission, I already told you I didn't do it!". Both sides were denying the other's claims, and as their argument heated up, Ichinose stared at them as if trying to discern who's in the right and who's in the wrong.

"What're you going to do if my phone breaks?". "What? Just tell the school and get yourself a new one!" Karuizawa sharply replies to Manabu. "...there were some precious photos in that phone" Manabu tells her as she picks up the phone and stares at Karuizawa with eyes harboring a grudge. Two other students from Class C backed up Manabe by standing in front of Karuizawa as if to intimidate her. "What.....are you trying to say I'm the bad one here?". "If you really are innocent, why are you so defensive? Let me take your photo" Manabe tells Karuizawa. "I....don't want to". I expected Karuizawa to respond with even more force, but she sounds surprisingly weak. Or more precisely, despite her trying to sound tough I could hear the fear in her voice. Perhaps that's just my imagination. "Aren't you just trying to hide your acts?" Manabe locks the camera onto Karuizawa as if forcibly trying to take a picture of her. The girls from Class C watch this unfold while cruelly laughing as if enjoying it. Only the last Class C student, Ibuki, took a different attitude and did not join in. She looked at Manabe as if in disgust but did not stop her. "This is stupid" Ibuki said.

"Stupid? What's that supposed to mean? This has nothing to do with you, Ibuki-san. You're not even Rika's friend" Manabe tells Ibuki. "That's right, I have no stake in this. So I'm just observing" Ibuki said with her arms crossed as she looked away from the scene. Manabe did not seem to like the attitude Ibuki took with her, but instead of confronting Ibuki, she started to raise her voice against Karuizawa instead. That might be because there is a definitively established hierarchy in Class C in which Ibuki ranks above Manabe. "In any case, I'm taking that photo" Manabe finally says. "No!...please say something to stop her" Karuizawa looked towards Machida from Class A and pleaded with him for help. "Manabe, if Karuizawa is objecting to it, then stop" Machida then speaks out. "T-this has nothing to do with you, Machida-kun".

"It doesn't matter, from what I've heard it seems like you're in the wrong Manabe. If Karuizawa refuses to let her photo be taken, it's wrong to

forcibly do so against her will. It would be much better if you talked with your friend yourself to confirm your story" Machida rebukes Manabe.

Of course Machida is in the right if what she says is true. But taking photos of someone against their will is a violation of manners. Manabe also recognizes this fact as she withdraws when confronted with that argument although it does not seem like she was satisfied stopping here. "S-stop with the strange accusations, really. And thank you, Machida-kun" Karuizawa looked at Machida respectfully and thanked him. Even though he was from Class A, it didn't seem like he was completely heartless. Takemoto and the other students didn't seem to be interested at all though. "...I only did the right thing" Machida replies to Karuizawa with a slight blush.

Perhaps this is the beginning of a new love for Machida and Karuizawa? But Karuizawa already has a boyfriend named Hirata so there's a slight problem there. But it seems like the conflict between Class C and Karuizawa will be a problem going forward.

2

The argument was never settled after all. 1 hour had passed and an announcement by the school was made allowing the students to leave their designated meeting rooms. The Class A students were the first ones to leave. "You're free to do as you please". With that, they left the room and slammed the door shut behind them with a bang, throwing the room back into silence. Even though Ichinose had rejected Katsuragi's strategy, in the end, there was no discussion between us. Is she still hiding something? Or did she really not think about anything beyond that? "Well, there will be 5 more discussions like this after all, so let's end this session here shall we?" Ichinose says with a refreshing voice. Basically, it seems the consensus we've reached is to spend time on our own than to discuss for now. Having processed quite a bit of information, Class D and probably Class C as well are bound to be exhausted.

Perhaps it's not such a bad idea to disband the group for now. "I'm going back" Karuizawa promptly said that as she stood to leave, but her legs were shaking as if she were feeling numb.

But in her panic to leave the room, Karuizawa accidentally stepped on Manabe's feet. "Ow!" Manabe screamed in pain. "Ahh...sorry. I didn't mean to" Karuizawa softly apologized before quickly leaving the room. "What...what the hell!?" Manabe shouted at us. She seemed to be angry both from the pain and Karuizawa's attitude and is lashing out at us. I quickly avert my eyes to avoid getting involved and escape. "Let's go too, I'd like to hear from Hirata as well". Since the other classes were already making their moves, it seems Yukimura wants to come up with a strategy for our class too. Sotomura stood up in response to Yukimura's statement. At the very end, only the three from Class B and Ibuki were left in the room. "I'm hungry again, do you think there's a lunch buffet going on?" Sotomura asks. No, no, you're the abnormal one here. What kind of body do you have to be able to digest all that food you ate in one hour. Normally, you'd get fat if you eat that much. But I doubt my sincere advice will reach his heart.

"Hey Yukimura, did you notice Karuizawa was acting strange?" I asked Yukimura immediately after we left the room. But Yukimura only made a strange face towards me in return. "She's always strange" he said earnestly. A straightforward response, but that's not what I wanted to hear, it's just my intuition but there was something definitely off about Karuizawa's behaviour. Sotomura didn't seem like he noticed a thing. I switched on my phone which I had turned off when entering the room and there were messages from Sakura. I checked the contents and it seems she wants to meet me if I have time. "Perfect timing". I was just thinking about contacting Hirata and Horikita to ask how their meetings went, but I might be able to gather more information from Sakura as well. "Hmmmm...where should we meet?". I think for now, the same meeting place as yesterday should do fine.

When I mailed that to Sakura, I instantly received a reply. There will certainly be crowds of students at this moment but if we ignore them they surely won't pay any attention to us as well. Since the first group discussion had just ended, a furious crowd of students awaited me at the elevator.

Since only ten people can ride the elevator at one time, it would be more time efficient to use the stairs, I thought. And as I was heading downstairs via the stairs, a new message arrived in my phone. "It's getting a little crowded so I'll head towards the ship's bow...sorry". "Ahh...it looks like Sakura can't handle a crowd". I then changed directions and started heading towards the bow as well. It is a ship filled with all sorts of facilities built for luxury, but the bow gives a wide view of the sea from the deck. As such, at the current time, there were few students there. In fact, it seems there's nobody there right now giving me monopoly over the whole area.

But even with the entire deck monopolized for our use, Sakura was still hiding behind a corner near a pillar in wait for me. It would be rude to call out so I approached her instead. "...I'd like to...how about it?". It was a small voice I heard coming from her over the wind, but I could not hear her well. "W-w-would you...d-d-date....m-m" Sakura was muttering away to herself but it simply looked creepy to me.

"Sakura. What are you doing?" I ask her quietly as to not surprise her. "Toooooooooooooooooooooouuuu!!!" Sakura screams as she jumps slightly. It actually surprised me. "S-s-s-s-s-since w-w-w-when did you get here?". "I just got here" I told her. Her wariness of her surroundings almost reminded me of a small animal being cautious. But was Sakura talking to her imaginary friend or a ghost? "Did you hear? Did you hear what I just said?". "Bits and pieces. But I don't know what you meant by those words". Sakura seemed relieved I had not heard what she said. "And? Why did you want to see me?" I asked. "Eeehh....that's....yeah oh r-right. I was feeling anxious about the exam". She then pushed a piece of paper

towards me, and when I took it from her and looked it over it contained a list of names.



Class A: Sawada Yasumi, Shimizu Naoki, Nishi Haruka, Yoshida Kenta

Class B: Kobayashi Yume, Ninomiya Yui, Watanabe Kihito

Class C: Yuuki Yuuya, Nomura Yuuji, Yajima Mariko

Class D: Ike Kanji, Sakura Airi, Sudou Ken, Matsushita Chiaki

It seems Sakura belongs to the (Cow) group. It seems things are also intense in this group. The males in the group are Sudou and Ike, men who wouldn't sympathize with Sakura's plight. And in this exam, one is forced to spend time with fellow group members from the same class no matter what. If I'm in the same group as her, I could help her out but as it stands, there's not much I can do right now.

Once it's time for the group to fight as one, they cannot afford to be scattered or hesitant. I could help her by secretly contacting her via phone during the middle of the exam, but if I adopt this unnatural behaviour in the middle of the exam, I would suddenly draw attention to myself. And in an exam like this, an action like that might as well mean the difference between life and death. "I thought it'd be great if there was somebody you knew from the other classes, but I suppose you wouldn't" I said. I thought about it, but if I wanted to help her, Ichinose and Kanzaki are the only ones I can ask help from. But since Ichinose is already in my group, it'll be hard for her to help too. I don't trust Sudou and Ike with Sakura, after all. "Sorry...I don't have any friends either" I tell her. "Oh, please don't apologize, I have no friends at all too" Sakura tells me. This is just sad, we're like two people competing against each other to see who can be more pathetic.

So instead of being proud of my lack of friends, I switched over to a different topic. "By the way, I also wanted to ask you something, Sakura" I told her. "Eeh? Me? What?".

"I was wondering if Yamauchi contacted you in any way since the discussion period ended" I told her. "Yamauchi-kun? No he hasn't. Is something wrong?" she asks. "I see". Back on the island, in order to make use of Horikita, I was forced to use Sakura first. To manipulate

Yamauchi, I promised to give him Sakura's address in exchange for his cooperation. Of course, I have no intention of giving the address to Yamauchi without Sakura's consent but I haven't told Yamauchi of this yet. I was worried he might have approached Sakura but it seems like I was worried for nothing. "In the meantime, if there's something on your mind contact me" I tell her. "Is it ok?". "Yeah, that's the least I can do for you". Even though I just gave her those vague words, Sakura's eyes lit up like an innocent child. Perhaps she's just happy interacting with me like this.

"I'll definitely call you then!" she exclaims to me. "Sure". Different from the image Sakura usually puts up, right now she seems full of life and vigor. It seems like she's learning to be more aggressive day by day. Although only a few days have passed since the island test. Sakura has grown considerably strangely enough. Since it was a crazy and taxing test, it seemed to have impacted a growing high school girl like Sakura. She didn't change completely, but even in a tough situation like this, she's learned to keep herself positive.

3

"Aaaaaaayyyyyyaaaaaooooooooookkkkkkoouuuuuujjjiiii!!!". And as soon as I went back inside the ship, a shadow fell upon me. With his hands flailing above his neck, he came in a hurry and seemed to be panicking. It seemed like a serious situation. That was what I saw when I turned back around, I saw the figure of Yamauchi Haruki, my classmate who had now taken the form of a demonic Asura.

"W-what's wrong?" I ask. Of course, I already knew what the reason was but I asked him as a matter of formality. "What are you asking that for? You promised to tell me Sakura's address, what the hell happened to that?". Unfortunately I had run into Yamauchi now of all times. I should think of something. "I wasn't aiming for you in particular, but I just wanted to know" he said. "Do you actually think a loner like me would know

Sakura's address?". I tried my hand at explaining it to him and tried to make it sound sincere so he would understand.

"Could it be?...you were trying to ask Sakura her address...just now?" he asked me. When I nodded, Yamauchi's face broke down into an expression of shock and he crumbled onto the floor on both knees. "Then that means...you didn't know her address...and you still used me?" he asked me.

"It seems like I did that yes" I admit. "And, what happened? Did Sakura give you her address?". "...sorry" I apologized to him. "Sorry. What do you mean sorry? I'm not asking for an apology right? I'm asking for her address" Yamauchi tells me. An emotionless reply like that reflected Yamauchi's disappointment in me. "How dare you...how dare you lie to meeeeeeeeeee!!!" Yamauchi yells at me. I do think I've done a bad thing by using him like that, but I still cannot give him Sakura's address like that without her consent.

Even if he asks her directly, she should reject him straight up bluntly. "Would you give me some more time?" I ask him. "What time? A liar is the start of a thief" he tells me. Out of everyone in Class D, I never imagined the first one to call me a liar would be Yamauchi. It's a shock. "Then are you going to forcibly ask Sakura?". "Yeah, I'm going to do that" he tells me.

He seems to be blinded by anger and is not thinking straight, he's seemingly intending on getting Sakura's address by force if need be.

"Sakura said she hates men who are only talk". "That's just you making it up, Ayanokouji" he says. "Yes. It can't be helped if you dislike me now, but it should also be obvious why I'm not giving you her address. And trying to ask her the address forcibly is pointless" I tell him. "...is just an

excuse. You never knew her address in the first place right?" Yamauchi lowers his head while averting his eyes from me. "But you know Sakura likes digital cameras, right? The truth is, I heard her current one is an outdated model but she doesn't have enough points to buy a new one, see? If Yamauchi, you buy her a new digital camera, it would be a great present for her, wouldn't you agree?" I tell him.

"Ohhh...I think that's great...but I don't have any points either" he finally admits. "You see, in this exam, by hiding the "target", becoming a traitor, or guiding your group together to victory you can easily gain enough points to buy her a digital camera, am I wrong?" I tell Yamauchi. "S-so, if I work hard, there's still a chance I can get close to Sakura?". Now I've ensured that there's only one conclusion Yamauchi will reach. "Right now, you, Yamauchi Haruki, need to work hard to show your masculinity. That's the only way you can get close to the former idol Sakura" I encourage him. There is a possibility that by stimulating him like this, he would work to his fullest potential and achieve better results in this exam.

"I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do it! I'm going to work hard and get Sakura for myself!" Yamauchi excitedly says. "Yes Yamauchi, you can do it. If it's you, you'll definitely succeed" I encourage him. "Oooooooooohhhhhhhh! I'm definitely going to win in this exam!". Somehow it seems like I managed to direct his anger in a different direction towards the exam. Maybe his anger towards me will return when the exam is over but for now I seem to have avoided the problem. If there's one scary problem here it'd be the fact that Yamauchi would be too fired up and aim for the "target" directly instead.

"I'll tell you this just in case but..." I decide to tell him this for his own sake.

"What?" he asks me. "Nothing. But if you find the "target" in your group, don't let the other classes beat you to the punch" I tell him. "Of course I

won't". But it'd be best if Yamauchi doesn't find the "target". Long term benefits over short term benefits and all that.

4

Since it is a fact that only Class A is guaranteed 'any choice of further education or employment' after graduation, it is certainly difficult for other classes to cooperate with them. Class B and Class D hold hands to defeat Class C and Class A. That also means, in reverse, Class C and Class A can form an alliance to defeat Class B and Class D. Keeping that in mind, when all these classes are forced into one group, what would happen? It's almost like trapping carnivores and herbivores in one cage. There is no feasible way to organize such a group.

However, by pure chance, it is possible for unity between even classes like that to occur. As long as its people with strong personalities like Hirata or Ichinose who take the lead. But even that is still a difficult task.

Class A did not participate in the second discussion period. But since Class A was deliberately keeping quiet, it was also impossible for the other classes to have an earnest discussion and time slowly passed in silence. I started to observe how the students from each class would react. It's not like everyone there had bad intentions, but most students were keeping to themselves in an attempt to stay on the safe side. "So for now, since it's the second gathering for us like this, I think we should get down to business as soon as possible since the number of times we gather like this is limited" Ichinose once again took the initiative. As expected of the peaceful Class B. Hamaguchi and the other Class B student were exactly the same too. Always attempting to start a joint alliance without hesitation.

It's almost like looking at Hirata. However, unlike Hirata, Ichinose and her group would definitely emphasize the victory of Class B in this exam.

And since the other students were still on their guard, a heavy air fell upon us. Everyone was becoming increasingly suspicious, increasingly wary. However, the three students of Class A were freed from all worries since they were casually tapping away at their phones. There was no rule saying you couldn't contact the other groups after all.

Rich is rich and poor is poor, there's nothing else to it. Class A can afford to be lax since they were overwhelming dominating the competition after all.

I imagined their loss during the island test would cause a change in their behaviour but it seems Katsuragi is attempting to portray a 'calm' image of his class to the other classes. And thinking about it carefully, it is indeed a very effective strategy.

And especially for a man who works alone like me, I cannot break through the wall that Class A had erected. "I don't particularly think we need a breakthrough now, but I do agree with the need for discussion. Class A may be trying to break away from all this, but I believe in the necessity of finding the "target" myself". Yukimura said that as if in agreement with Ichinose.

Indeed, if the "target" is in the other classes, this is an opportunity that cannot be wasted. Or perhaps this attitude is an attempt to camouflage the fact that Yukimura is the one who's the "target". "But can you really find them just by talking? I don't think so. The "target"'s hard to find, or rather the exam itself is hard" Karuizawa speaks up. "I understand your worries, Karuizawa-san. But isn't this just a matter of perspective? Both the island test and this current exam, it's meant to come as a 'surprise' to the students wouldn't you agree?".

"Surprise?" Karuizawa asks. "If it's sunrise then you can leave it to me. That's my specialty. Mo-e-a-g-a-r-e!!!" Sotomura suddenly shouts. It seems he's made a misunderstanding. It's not sunrise, they said surprise. "Living on a ship like this is fun isn't it? You can talk or play with your

phone however you like, even if you're forced to attend discussion for two hours a day. You're still free to do as you wish". "Well...yeah it is fun".

"Exactly right? That's why we need to talk more comfortably, like a group of friends. You'll just suffer if you hole yourself up in a shell like Machida-kun there" Ichinose tries to convince Karuizawa.

Certainly if you consider it not as an 'exam' but as a 'vacation' it becomes easier to discuss amongst your group. It's just a matter of perspective like Ichinose said, but the more positive thinking you are, it'll be easier to clear the exam. But after hearing what Ichinose had to say, Machida just began to laugh. "You guys are free to do whatever you want, but you're very unlikely to find the "target" this way. I don't know where the "target" is but if they are not already cooperating with their classmates, they will surely make the decision to keep themselves hidden to gain points that way. And perhaps the "target" is actually within Class B. That is possible too. Can you really trust them?" Machida asks. He spoke those words as if intending to shake the hearts of the students gathered there.

"The same could be said for you too, Machida-kun" Ichinose tells him. "...of course". For a moment, Machida broke eye contact with Ichinose. To be more precise, his eyes wandered to a student named "Morishige" sitting beside him. But then he quickly returned eye contact and once again radiated the 'calm' image of Class A to the group.

"We're not particularly hung up on who the "target" is, we get 100,000 points allocated to us monthly, there's no one in our class who'd be interested in the 500,000 point reward for this exam" Machida finally tells Ichinose. "Really? So you're telling me you don't want even 1 extra point? It's not like the school imposes a limit on the amount of points you can have" she replies. "That's stupid. You can be delusional all you want, but

don't accuse us unnecessarily like that" Machida retorts to her. Ichinose, who just kept smiling at Machida throughout the argument, gave off the impression to me of being a tough opponent.

Even though Machida claimed he would not participate in the discussions, he had still been baited by Ichinose into answering. And as long as he talks, information will inevitably leak out of him. By using Karuizawa and Yukimura to provoke Machida, Ichinose had been steadily collecting information from Class A the entire time. I wonder whether Machida has noticed it yet.

Meanwhile, Karuizawa just kept sighing and fiddling with her phone. There are no rules stating one cannot use their phone during the exam's discussion period but it is bad manners for her to do that while the consensus was to find the "target". Or is Karuizawa actually part of the CIA or FBI and is relaying information to Hirata via phone? If she is, I'd respect her a lot...but I doubt it. Of course Karuizawa never puts much effort into anything so this behaviour should be normal, but ever since the exam started, I've noticed something is off with Karuizawa. Karuizawa acting differently, and the reunion with Ibuki and her argument with Manabe's group.

And I realized something. None of her actions then were the 'usual' Karuizawa. In Class D, whether her reputation is good or not, there is no denying that she, along with Hirata, brought the class together as one. She normally would bring us together as one to clear this exam, whether we had the capacity for it or not, but she never showed any sign of it. Hirata is Hirata no matter where he is, and Kushida is also always Kushida. But Karuizawa has definitely changed. Or perhaps she's feeling inferior to Manabe and her group, who rank above her in terms of the school's caste system. What we need right now for Class D to rise

through the ranks is not just gathering more points. Compared to classes like A and B, Class D is still severely lacking in cohesiveness.

Karuizawa Kei, who will be indispensable for that cohesiveness, is an existence who controls the girls of Class D. That's my current assessment. That's why I'm worried about her right now. I need to determine whether she will be a useful existence or a useless existence to me. I cannot afford to take my time in this case considering that the exam period itself is short. Depending on the circumstances, I might need to use force with her. Immediately once 1 hour had passed, Class A leaves the room. It seems they intend to keep their stance of keeping their silence to the end. Ichinose sighs and says "Well.....I suppose this is going to be a tough exam. How about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Is this tough on you?" she asks me. The one who called out to me like that, surprisingly, was the student named Ichinose Honami. The girl who rules Class B.

She's always calm, smart and collected. She seems to have noticed I have not yet given any opinions in particular about the exam and called out to me. If I happened to be in the same class as her, I would have fallen in love with her. She is just that charming. Not just Class B, boys from other classes must have definitely fallen for her as well. In popularity rankings, Ichinose and Kushida would be direct rivals.

"Honestly, I'm the type to sit back and relax in an exam like this" I tell her. "It's still too early to give up, let's work together to point this in a positive direction!" Ichinose encourages me. It seems Ichinose is determined to fight hard now. "Even if we continue the dialogues, I doubt the "target" will simply give their identity up like that. The merits of hiding their identity outweighs the demerits of revealing it after all. If something goes wrong, Class A's worst case scenario prediction would come true" Ichinose says. Despite saying a negative remark like that, Ichinose's eyes did not lose their confidence. Amongst the various thoughts I had about

her, I could not figure out how she was able to maintain this attitude through adversity.

"Either way, it's the end for today's discussion. Good work, both of you". "No such thing. We didn't do anything much". Ichinose switches over to her classmates instantly after that. I have observed her for today, but I was unable to ascertain what Ichinose's real aims are yet. But at least our group is still producing results this way. She might be concocting a strategy she cannot let anyone else know about for all I know. When Manabe of Class C and her friends stood up to leave the room, I chased after them. Once they reached the elevator, I casually called out to Manabe.

"Do you have some time?" I ask her. Once she noticed me, she quickly went back on her guard since she most likely was not expecting me to call out to her. "I overheard your argument with Karuizawa. Something about pushing over someone in a cafe or something." I tell her. "And what's wrong with that?" she retorts. Normally they would not show any interest in me, but when I brought that topic up, all three girls focused their attention to me. "I'm not 100% sure, but I think I saw Karuizawa push over your friend at the cafe" I told them.

"R-really?" Manabe asked me stiffly. I nod. "Yeah. I didn't like how she acted back then, so I thought I'd give you a heads up" I admit to them. I ignited the fires of argument between Karuizawa and the Class C girls deliberately. Truthfully, I didn't see Karuizawa do anything like that, but I lied to create this situation. Now, Manabe and the others are sure to take action against Karuizawa. I'm very excited to see how Karuizawa will respond to that, and how she will change...

Once I got back to my room, it was already late and I collapsed on the bed without talking with anyone. Once it was close to 00:00, I thought I'd go to sleep but then I heard a noise. It was Hirata who was staring at me anxiously. Yukimura too, was sitting in the sofa installed in our room. "Good work out there, Ayanokouji-kun. You're quite late" he said to me. "Yeah. Speaking of which, I wanted to ask you something Hirata" I tell him. "You must be tired, but if you're ok with just a while, I'd like to ask you something" Hirata tells me the exact same thing at the same time as me. "Hmm? You wanted to ask me something too?" Hirata asks me.

"No, I'll listen to you first, Hirata. My question is just something trivial". Yukimura also looks like he wants to ask something, probably something related to the exam at hand. If I refuse to listen now, the mood in the room would get awkward. Changing into my jersey, I walk over to the two of them. Hirata moves slightly a bit to give me space to sit on the sofa as well. I wanted to ask Hirata if he had any information on the person known as Sakayanagi but there's no problem listening to him first.

"I got asked for consultation on the exam from Yukimura-kun, so I thought I'd report it to you as well" Hirata tells me. "I did say not to include you to not disturb you, though" he added. I suppose Kouenji in the same room as us would not be interested in such talk after all. "Sorry Hirata Boy, I am currently perfecting my physical beauty" was what Kouenji said. Kouenji, with a naked upper body, was repeatedly doing push ups in the room. He seemed to be sweating quite a bit but that did not seem to affect him at all.

It's not something an ordinary high school student would be capable of. But is Kouenji even properly participating in this exam, I thought. Hirata answered as if knowing my exact thoughts. "Kouenji-kun is actually participating in the groups. After all, points do get deducted if he does not show up" Hirata offered.

"I actually received word from my friends that two of our classmates have been assigned as the "target" you know" Hirata tells me. "What? That means---". "I can't tell you though, they only told me because they trusted me" Hirata shot us down. "Are you saying you don't trust us, Hirata? If you know, I also have the right to know. Also, if we know who the "target" is we might be able to get a hint to clear the exam better. Besides, it's only natural that as fellow classmates, we share information with each other" Yukimura said that to Hirata. "Yeah....that's why I also thought to consult you on it...the truth is" Hirata said. That's why he wanted to talk to us like this, he already knew who some of the "targets" were.

"Hey Hirata, it might be better for you to tell us via phone just in case. There's no telling who's sniffing around where" I told him. "You're right, give me a moment" Hirata told us. Hirata then turned on his phone and flipped it in our direction. And two names were written there. Kushida of the (Dragon) group and Minami of the (Horse) group. These were the identities of two "targets".

"I got it" Yukimura said that without giving anything else away. Since Kushida is the "target", we might be in the advantage in the extremely contested (Dragon) group. But the fact that the "target" is from our class is also a scary thought. It would have been best if the "target" happened to be in another class. "Don't worry, everything's going well" Hirata assured me with a confident face. The three members of the (Dragon) group from Class D are all capable people who wouldn't betray their identity no matter what, he seemed to be saying. "Even in the (Rabbit) group, each class should have an equal probability of getting the "target" amongst them. But I think Class D could have three "targets", one in the (Rabbit) group who should be keeping their identity hidden right now".

"Yeah. Yukimura-kun's idea is correct. Perhaps they've consulted someone else instead of me is all. After all, consulting someone on their identity could increase the risk of being discovered" Hirata says. While we were having a serious discussion, Kouenji started to sing from across the room. Having been patient for a while, it seems Yukimura finally lost patience with Kouenji after hearing his humming that would seemingly last forever.

"Kouenji, can you stop humming that annoying song? And I won't tell you to do it seriously but at least see this exam through to the end. Don't suddenly retire like you did on the island test" Yukimura rebuked Kouenji. "It couldn't be helped, back then my body was in ill shape, I can't do the impossible" Kouenji simply replied. "Geh...it's just a fake illness". "But to think the exam will continue on for two more days, it sounds troublesome indeed" Kouenji who continued his push ups said that before getting up back on his feet and putting his towel on the bed.

"Troublesome? You're not even thinking about the exam properly" Yukimura accused Kouenji. "There's no meaning in continuing an uninteresting exam, it's just a simple quiz to find the liar after all" Kouenji told him. Kouenji then took out his phone and fiddled with it for a while. Then suddenly, all our phones rang at once and we received a mail from the school. "Kouenji, what did you do?" Yukimura cried out at Kouenji. Then me and Hirata both rushed to check the mail in our phones. It said "The (Monkey) group's test has ended. Students from the (Monkey) group are no longer required to participate. Please be careful not to disturb the other students".

"The (Monkey) group is yours, Kouenji!". "Exactly. Now I have my freedom back. Adieu" Kouenji simply said before throwing away his cell phone and disappearing into the bathroom, leaving us all in shock.

"D-don't fuck around! We're all doing our best and that guy---!". "We don't know yet, perhaps he did something...". "That's impossible, he's just doing it to be free as soon as possible". We all reacted to this news. I myself don't think Kouenji ever took the exam seriously. However, he is extremely perceptive and his observation ability is remarkable. If what he said about the exam "find the liar" is true, he may excel at it. Kouenji's actions became known to all the students as Hirata's phone started chirping relentlessly with messages flooding in.

The chat was overflowing with the voices of students who were surprised at the news. I'm sure Katsuragi, Ryuuen and Ichinose would also be surprised by this. No one must have expected a 'traitor' would appear on the very first day of the exam. Horikita has also sent a message to my phone. "Sorry. Things seem confusing. I'll call you now" was the message. "Shit. Thanks to Kouenji, things have escalated beyond a simple discussion". "I'm going out for a bit". It seems Yukimura won't be able to sleep after being irritated like that by Kouenji's actions. Having confirmed the discussion's flow has died down, I quietly left the room.

Although Kouenji's actions have ended one group's exam, I cannot keep on dwelling on this forever. Honestly, my actions would be limited in this exam. Even if I plan it out, it would be difficult to guide all the remaining groups to victory for Class D. You could even call it an impossible task. If all the students worked together hand-in-hand it would be possible, but that is not happening.

And I cannot interfere with another group's answer using my own phone. There are other methods but there's no time and the stakes are high. If I had information that could completely overturn the tables that's another matter. The ones holding the key to that are Class D's Hirata and Kushida. "This is impossible". There are three more days including the holidays. What's impossible is impossible after all.

Even if I gain both of their absolute cooperation, I still don't have enough eyes and ears on my side. I cannot know what is happening in the discussions of every group there is. Of course, including Horikita and Sakura, there might still be a possibility left. As expected, I need more eyes and ears on my side for this exam.

6

A sky full of stars spread out before me. I had stumbled onto the deck of the ship at night trying to find a place. "This is amazing...". It was an order of magnitude above what we usually see in books and pictures. It was a beautiful sight. This is the sort of night view you won't be able to see in large cities. And there were a few male and female students looking up at the starry sky while holding hands and rubbing shoulders. I felt a bit lonely watching that. Since it was dark out with little light I could not see their faces. And I don't care much for romantic outings like that anyways.

But among the students looking up at the night sky there was one girl who was standing alone in a silhouette. "No, no". Even if I called out to her now, I can't just say 'why don't we view the stars together' and try to pick her up that way. I don't want to be there when her boyfriend arrives. But I was interested to see who that girl is so I approached her. The girl noticed me and turned to look at me. "A...a...Ayanokouji-kun?". "That voice...is it Kushida?". And so the girl, Kushida, emerged out of the shadows with a surprised face looking at me.

"Are you...alone?". Perhaps Kushida's here to meet her boyfriend. Thinking that made my chest tighten and hurt. "Yeah. I can't sleep right now" she told me. "Oh, I see". So she's not here for a night view date with her boyfriend after all. I felt relieved knowing that. It seems Kushida just

got out of the bath, there was a very comforting scent coming from Kushida who was wearing a jersey. It seems it's the same scent as the shampoo given to us in our rooms.

"Are you not cold?" I asked her. "I'm ok. More importantly, are you here alone Ayanokouji-kun?" she asks me. When I nodded, Kushida laughed happily. "So we're both alone then? I'm a bit happy" she says. ".....". I should have said a nice one-liner at this point, but of course I couldn't say it.

On the contrary, my heart rate is increasing just by being alone with Kushida in a place full of couples. Kushida must hate the situation though, deep down inside. "In any case, I'll be taking my leave" I tell her. "You're leaving already?". "Yeah, I'm getting sleepy" I reply to her. Of course I didn't want to sleep at all but it can't be helped. "I see, then I'll see you tomorrow, Ayanokouji-kun!". "Good night, Kushida".

After exchanging farewells with her, I pathetically turn my back to leave. But then. "Wait!!!" Kushida screamed and jumped into my chest. I could feel her warmth even through her jersey in this cold weather.

"K-k-k-Kushida? W-what are you doing?" I ask her. Of course, in this unexpected situation, I was panicking. It was beyond my understanding. ".....". But Kushida did not answer me immediately.

Then, in a small, squeaking voice. She says "Sorry...suddenly I...felt a bit lonely being alone by myself". She whispered that to me while being in my chest. Those words were like a boxer's punch to me and my brain went blank for a moment. And for a few more seconds, Kushida kept burying her face in my chest. And then suddenly, as if a spell was broken, she released me and took her distance.



"S-sorry. I suddenly hugged Ayanokouji-kun...good night!". I couldn't see Kushida's face very well in the dark, but I had a feeling she was also blushing. And without saying anything, Kushida ran away, leaving me to stand there holding my chest to feel the warmth that she left behind.

Thanks to this, I won't be able to sleep anymore tonight. I can't return to my room like this. So I decided to walk around the ship for a while.

"Aahhh...that surprised me. Now that it's over I feel a bit thirsty now" I say to myself.

There should be a few vending machines on the first floor and so I decided to head there before returning to my room. But then near the vending machine, I found a strange group of three people. There was Chabashira-sensei, and Class B's Hoshinomiya-sensei and Class A's Mashima-sensei. They were sitting on the sofa and quietly spending their time. This area is technically not off-limits to the students, but since there is a bar here that none of the students could enter, students usually avoid coming here.

I came here for a change, but it seems like I've stumbled onto the chance to gain some information. I erased my presence and slowly and quietly approached them. "You know, it's been a while. Since the three of us got together like this". "It's fate, in the end we all chose the path of the teacher". "Stop it. There's no point in talking about that". "Oh yeah, speaking of which, I saw you on a date. New girlfriend? Mashima-kun, you're surprisingly motivated on that front".

"Chie, how about you? What happened to your former man?". "Haha, I broke up with him after two weeks. You see, I'm the type of girl that does it with a man and breaks it off before the relationship gets serious" Hoshinomiya-sensei replies.

"That's usually the man's line, you know". "Ahh, but I'm not doing it with Mashima-kun. You're my best friend after all, I'd hate to ruin our friendship" she tells Mashima-sensei. "Relax. It's not about that". "Uwaaa...that's a shock all on its own" Hoshinomiya-sensei pours whiskey into an empty glass and drank it all in one, large gulp. Compared to that, Chabashira-sensei was slowly sipping on sake as if it were a cocktail. "More importantly, what are you going to do, Chie?". "What're you talking about so suddenly?".

"Generally, the policy here is to put all the representatives of each class in the (Dragon) group". "I'm not intending on messing around here. Indeed as far as attitude and grades go, Ichinose-san is the top of my class, but the probability of success in society cannot be measured by numerical parameters only. I decided there is a hurdle she must overcome before that. Besides putting her in (Rabbit) group is fitting. A rabbit is cute right? Going pyonpyon, just like Ichinose-san" Hoshinomiya-sensei said.

"I hope you're right". "Hoshinomiya's words are indeed reasonable, is there some hidden meaning behind them?". "I just don't want you to make judgments based on personal grudges". "Are you still talking about what happened 10 years ago? I thought we got over that...". "I wonder, you're the type to run their mouth as soon as I'm not immediately in front of you. You're the type that's not satisfied unless you're one step ahead. That's why you put Ichinose in (Rabbit) group right?". "What do you mean? Explain, Hoshinomiya".

"I genuinely thought Ichinose-san needed to learn a lesson so I had her removed from (Dragon) group. Speaking of which, Sae-chan was also focusing quite a bit on Ayanokouji-kun. It's just a coincidence right? Coincidence, coincidence. When the island test ended, you seemed glad Ayanokouji-kun turned out to be the leader?" Hoshinomiya-sensei said. "That's unrelated". But Mashima-sensei nodded as if he were convinced. But then he spoke to Hoshinomiya-sensei in a strict tone. "There's no specific rule for it but I want to protect our morals. I'd like to avoid reporting on a colleague's failure" he said. "Hey, you might not trust me. But don't just blame me, Sakagami-sensei is also a problem right? Class C already has a bad reputation since another person should've been in (Dragon) group but Ryuuen-kun was sent in instead." she replied. "Indeed, the students this year seem to all be special". I have gotten quite a bit of information on the exam already so I decided to go back. If I

stayed, I'd only get wrapped up in further trouble. I already know now that Ichinose was sent to scout me. It seems my movements are already been noticed and restricted.

Chapter 3: Double Question

"...are you kidding?" Horikita greeted me with a blaming tone of voice. "Unfortunately it is true. Kouenji just suddenly up and ended the exam for his group" I reply to her. "Are you an idiot? Why didn't you stop him from rampaging around like that? That was your responsibility as his roommate" she tells me. "That's impossible, besides there's no use crying over spilt milk now" I said. The brute force method that Kouenji had used to end his group's exam had been circulating around the students causing the class to be in an uproar. That's why in yesterday's chat, Horikita had wanted to meet me directly. It seems she's still unconvinced as she was shaking her head from side to side. "I'll scold him for it next time I see him, I'd like to avoid such incidents again in the future" Horikita tells me. "You should know that's pointless, words won't reach him. You'll just get dragged into his pace. For now, let's concentrate on our own groups" I said in response.

Since he's my roommate, I might get blamed for not having stopped him in time so I decided to change the subject. "Indeed my group is full of troublesome enemies, but I won't fall behind them" Horikita tells me. Her attitude is as strong as ever, and I suppose I'll have to leave it to her in this case. On my end, too, I'm having a bit of trouble dealing with Ichinose, who Hoshinomiya-sensei sent to scout me out. "Speaking of which, since you're also a girl, I'd like to ask you something" I tell her. "What's with that line? I was always a girl from the start, you know" she instantly retorts, having misunderstood my words as sarcasm as she looks at me with slightly disappointed eyes.

"No. That's not it, that's not it. I was just saying I'd like to ask you as a girl". Since it seemed she would get angrier if I kept trying to make

excuses like that, I quickly got down to business. "I would like information on Karuizawa" I tell her. As I'm planning to make contact with Karuizawa, I need information on her. If she were to make a ranking of boys in the class, I'm sure to be at the bottom after all. "So you'd like to consult me on the matter of Karuizawa?" Horikita asks me. I nod. "I'd like to keep track of my group members, but I'm finding it a bit hard. I should be able to deal with Sotomura and Yukimura, but Karuizawa's a problem. After the island test ended, you once got invited to lunch by Karuizawa right?" I tell Horikita.

"You should know I already rejected her, I'm not interested in Karuizawa-san at all. If you want information on her that badly, why don't you go ask Hirata-kun? If it's him he'll surely be able to set you up" Horikita replies to me. That is true, but before the exam started, I had passed out on a chance to have lunch with Karuizawa and Hirata. Surely Hirata remembers the incident as well, so I'd like to avoid asking him with this timing. "Are you worried that she might be the "target" or something of the sort?" Horikita suddenly asks me. "That's part of it. But right now, it's impossible for me to understand Karuizawa's behaviour. I was just curious" I tell her. "Then it's a waste of time, her behaviour has no reason behind it. If you care about her, it'll just be a waste of your time" she replies to me. "Horikita, I don't think it's a good thing to say that about others". "Say that about others? What do you mean?" she asks me. "Of course you've only seen the selfish and irritating side of Karuizawa so far. But you do know she probably does have a good side too?" I reply to her.

"Is there really a good side? I can't imagine it. Isn't she just full of flaws?" Horikita asks me. Of course, currently as far as cooperativeness goes I have to admit Horikita is equal to or better than her. "When you first meet someone, the first instinct is to judge them on their appearances right? Whether they're cool or cute or the such. Then you'd judge them via dialogue to see their inner self. Whether they're social or aggressive or passive and such". Having said that, Horikita crosses her

arms and waits for my next words. "But even that's just still the outside. Their real mindset will not be immediately visible from just that. Take Kushida, or Ibuki or even me for instance. The 'front' personality and the 'back' personality are well divided" I tell Horikita. "Does Karuizawa-san have such a divide too?" she asks me. "It's something most people have, even if they are not aware of it. Horikita, you have it too". Because whenever she is in front of her brother, she always exposes her true, fragile nature.

"I'm still not entirely convinced, but I can understand that you'll know her better through direct contact" Horikita tells me. Of course that is easier said than done, because if I hadn't decided to put in the effort, I would never be able to know Karuizawa's true nature in the first place. "And? Is there a good use for Karuizawa-san?" Horikita asks me. "I can't put it clearly in words yet, but if I had to say it would be the 'ability to rule'. She has initiative and there's no denying that her status in Class D is unshakeable" I tell Horikita. However, in our (Rabbit) group, I have not seen that side of her yet. This is why I thought to ascertain the true nature of Karuizawa as quickly as possible. "Assuming she has such a capability, what will you do? Will you bring Karuizawa-san into our group too?" she asks me. "I wonder about that" I tell her. While I was wondering about my answer, that man from yesterday came back to us.

"Yo, you two. Are you having a little date in the shade?". It was Ryuen who said that. He wasn't with Ibuki today, but rather, approaching us with a creepy smile on his face. "You're pretty free yourself, even if you corner me like this, there's nothing you stand to gain" Horikita rebukes Ryuen. "I'm the one who gets to decide on that. So, have you decided to try and find the "target"?" And again Ryuen sits down on a chair nearby without permission. "Whatever my plans are, I'm not telling you" Horikita says. "That's a shame, I thought to discuss it with you. But it looks like you haven't made any progress with your search yet" Ryuen tells Horikita. "That's interesting, are you saying you know who the "target" is then?"

Horikita asks him. But looking at her with a strange expression, Ryuuen answers her as if he had expected her to ask him that from the start. "I've already discovered who the 'target' is, would you believe me if I said that?" Ryuuen asks Horikita. "No I don't. You're not someone like Ichinose-san or Katsuragi-kun with allies on your side. You only have enemies. Nobody would gather that sort of information for you" Horikita replies to Ryuuen.

"That's not true. Indeed, I'm not in the 'making friends' club like them. But making friends and gathering information are two completely different things" Ryuuen says in response. He spoke to Horikita with an attitude almost resembling a teacher being disappointed in their student for not getting the right answer. "Unfortunately, I've already dipped my hands into this exam. Depending on the circumstances, Class C might just be the one to win" Ryuuen says. "N-no way". No, what he says might just be the truth.

The school always makes exams based on very specific criteria. The midterms were the same, the finals were the same and the island test was also the same. If you understand the 'rules' behind the exam, it is possible to achieve a high score and produce good results. If that is true, this exam is no different. If it's him, he must already understand that fact. "It's very simple, you just have to find the 'target' is all. Disassemble the structure of the group and analyze it until you find the answer". "Indeed, anyone would've thought that. But will they answer honestly? Since the school guarantees anonymity, one can just remain silent and gain 500,000 points that way." Horikita tells Ryuuen. But Ryuuen answers calmly in response to Horikita's doubt. "I just have to make sure it's a situation where they would answer honestly without lies". "A situation to make them answer honestly without lies?" Horikita asks him. "Since I asked everyone for their contacts, I can simply ask them one by one without the school ever knowing." Ryuuen says. "Are you insane? This is

prohibited by the school. If discovered, you'd be expelled" Horikita asks him in shock.

"It's not a problem. I'm standing here right now because it's not a problem. You understand the meaning of that right?" Ryuuen says. It was a brute force method Ryuuen could only use because he has the stature of an absolute tyrant. If he forcibly looks at the phone of another class's student, no doubt Ryuuen would be reported and expelled. But Ryuuen is dominant in Class C. Whatever he does, no one would utter a complaint. And if there is no complaint, there is no problem. It means Ryuuen's actions are still within the safe limits of the school's rules. That must be Ryuuen's strategy. The strategy to forcibly strip all secrets from Class C. And if that is true, Ryuuen could have the identities up to three "targets". That would be a massive hint for him in this exam.

To put in an easy to understand manner, it would be like writing the question and answer on different sides of a panel. Normally you wouldn't know the answer unless you turn the panel around. But if the panel is folded like a paper, it may be possible to get a hint of the answer on the other side. Basically, Ryuuen may already know the names of all the "targets" in this exam. "It seems like you finally understand the situation" Ryuuen says at last. "...Yes. But if you already know the answer, shouldn't you have already mailed it over to the school?" Horikita asks him. "Maybe I'm just fooling around". "You don't know when someone else will arrive at the answer, you shouldn't be so off-guard if so" Horikita says in response. There's no proof, but I have a feeling Horikita's assumption is correct. If he already knows the answer, there's no point in delaying it. He should have ended it when he could.

"So, I'm finally at the last stage". "Ryuuen-kun, by the way can I ask you something? Yesterday the (Monkey) group's exam ended. What do you think about that?" Horikita asks him. "Nothing in particular, I don't care

about what the weaklings are doing". Ryuuen simply left those words behind as he walked away. "I don't know how much of what he said is true". Horikita had a perplexed expression on her face while staring at the back of Ryuuen who was walking away. And then with confidence, I looked beneath Horikita's chair and there I found a single phone with its recording mode activated. On that phone, one chat. Just one chat. Was sent to it. It had neither a ringer nor vibration activated. And did not see the full contents of the chat but for a moment, I saw the words "Sorry about yesterday" sent by someone to Ryuuen on it.

Perhaps there's something wrong with his class? I didn't want to dig any deeper into that and returned to my normal posture on my chair. Horikita quickly grasped the situation too, and quickly took out her own phone and typed this to me. "If that phone is indeed his, better not to talk carelessly" she typed to me. What she said is indeed true. "Do you think what Ryuuen said was true? What he said about pinning down the "targets" from every class. Horikita looked at me in surprise for a moment but then she quickly understood the meaning behind my words. "I wonder. I can't say for sure with 100% certainty, there's not much time for this exam after all". "You have it rough too".

"I'm going to work you to the bone, we also need to find the "targets" as quickly as possible" Horikita then tells me. "Easier said than done, there's no way I can do that" I tell her. "I'm not expecting much from you too, but I just wanted information on the (Rabbit) group from you" she says. By having this conversation, I was able to highlight Horikita's talent and my own incompetence. In doing so, suspicion would be diverted off me to a certain degree. After all, Ryuuen did try to eavesdrop using his own phone. "If there's no particular expectation on me, I'll give it a shot" I tell Horikita. Then without saying anything else, Horikita pressed a button on the elevator and left. Now, should I go back to my room and sleep? Or come up with a strategy for the exam?

In any case, I decided to leave Ryuuen's phone as it is. And with that, I decided to head back to my own room. I can also learn more about Horikita's group from Hirata there after all. And fortunately, Hirata, also happens to be in the same room as me. And he should be approaching this exam with a different perspective from Horikita after all. But Hirata was not in the room when I got there, only Yukimura. And he was sitting on the edge of the bed with a stern expression on his face. "Is something wrong?" I ask him. I cannot ignore a roommate like that after all, and Yukimura also realized I was there since he sighed quietly and muttered at me. "It's about our group. Why do we have to be Karuizawa and Sotomura?" he grumbles. "What's with you, all of a sudden". "Haven't you heard? It seems there's a pattern to how the groups are assigned. The (Dragon) group has the most excellent students assigned to it. That makes it worse" he says. I see now. That's why he was feeling anxious. Indeed, the (Dragon) group to which Horikita belongs has the best ones.

There's no doubt about that judging by the conversation of the teachers yesterday and Ryuuen's own assessment. If we go by academic ability only, however, Yukimura is up there with Hirata and Horikita too. Of course he would not be satisfied by being placed in the (Rabbit) group instead. Yukimura did avoid using her name directly but he was looking at me intently. There's nothing I can do even if you say that. I then decided to head to my bed and wait until Hirata gets back. But Yukimura was looking at me with suspicious eyes the whole way. "Ayanokouji. I just want to check with you to be sure. But you're not the "target" right?" Yukimura asks me.

"I'm going to deny it, but is there even meaning in checking?" I ask him in reply. "Of course, in this exam 'cooperation' is of the essence. In other words, if you cooperate we won't lose" he tells me. "That's true. Unfortunately, I really am not the "target" here". "That's true right? You better not be trying to hog points for yourself" Yukimura tells me. Since it seems to be his personal policy to doubt others, that was unsurprisingly

Yukimura's response to me. "I'm not the "target", can I believe you're not as well, Yukimura?" I ask him.

"Of course I'm not. By the way Sotomura is also not the "target", you know" Yukimura tells me. This was a confirmation between friends, almost like a code word saying 'do not betray each other'. "I also asked Karuizawa and she denied being the "target" too but believing in her words is a different matter" Yukimura continues. It seems Yukimura, who dislikes Karuizawa, is inclined to disbelieve her words. Of course, to know for sure, he could have simply checked her phone but given the relationship between them, that seems difficult to do. It seems Yukimura was satisfied for now since he didn't ask any further. I bury my face in the pillow and closed my eyes. I felt uneasy having someone in the room watch me sleep, but it's not that unpleasant. I can be as adaptive as a chameleon when I need to be, in terms of making friends as well. It seems even Yukimura has started to acknowledge me as a friend. I then fall asleep after hearing Yukimura's slight sigh again from across the room.

1

In the afternoon, I once again went to the discussion room of the (Rabbit) group. But even in the same place and the same space, depending on who you're with the atmosphere will also inevitably change. I arrived in the room ten minutes before the start of the discussion and the one who arrived right after me was Karuizawa. When she saw me, her expression changed into a disgusted one and she immediately averted her eyes away from me. She then sat in a corner of the room (the corner furthest away from me) and started fiddling with her phone. It's not like we had a fight or anything, or that we don't get along. I'm just simply put, hated by her. But that's the worst type of relationship to have.

If there is a reason behind the hate, there is room for reconciliation. However if there is only an ambiguous dislike of me, I cannot make any

breakthrough with her. Currently, my standing with her is quite bad. I could have left the room and spent time out in the hallway until Ichinose and the others arrive. But I can't just leave because the atmosphere is getting awkward in here.

I quickly corrected my stance in a manner befitting a dignified person like a man. In any case, this type of exam is particularly bad for me. Especially since it revolves around the concept of 'dialogue' which is a weakness for me. After spending the entire semester as a loner, it's not like I can suddenly start cultivating a chatty image. But Karuizawa seems to have no intention of keeping quiet since she placed the phone near her ear and started speaking.



"Ahh, Rinocchi? How're things over there? Here? Things are awful here" she spoke to her friend through the phone. Since we were the only people in the room, naturally I could hear every bit of her conversation. The worst part is that once she ends her call, an awkward silence descended upon the room. Then she spoke to me "Aah...speaking of which are you the "target"? It seems Yukimura-kun and

Soto.....something-kun aren't" she asks me. At least remember Sotomura's name, I thought. Since there was no one else in the room, it seems she's picked me to talk to.

It was a question Yukimura also asked me just a while ago. It can't be helped that everyone would want to check this with me. "No" I reply to her. "I see, then that's fine". But unlike Yukimura, she didn't ask again to confirm. "Do you trust me?" I ask her. "Ha? You said you're not the "target" right?" she replies to me. I was surprised that she would so easily trust in my words. It's not like we ever got along or anything. But I suppose there's no real need to confirm that anyways, because what I'm really aiming for in this exam aren't the points. What I want to confirm is whether this person known as "Karuizawa Kei" is truly a useful existence or not. "You're both early". It seems the three students from Class B have arrived at the same time. "Let's get along today as well" I reply to Ichinose. Ichinose also called out to Karuizawa with those words but Karuizawa ignored her and continued fiddling with her phone.

And as it was yesterday, the members gathered together prior to the discussion. It seems the situation still hasn't changed at all from the previous discussions.

Class A quickly took its distance and only the remaining three classes gathered to form a circle. Seeing that, Karuizawa stood up and went over to join Class A and sat down next to Machida of Class A. That action was probably taken as a defensive measure against Manabe. Machida did not actively take part in the discussions, but his 'presence' was still very strong and his voice was influential in the group still. And there is still the difference in strength between a male and a female student which leaves Manabe and the Class C girls unable to do anything to Karuizawa with Machida around.

If Karuizawa had decided to depend on the unreliable me or Sotomura instead, Manabe and her group would not have hesitated to attack her. Thinking that way, Karuizawa's decision to choose Machida is correct.

"It's ok, if anything happens, I'll definitely save you" Machida promises Karuizawa. "Thank you, Machida-kun" Karuizawa says in reply. It seems that by being relied on, Machida has become overly conscious of Karuizawa. Since she is a cute girl on the outside, it can't be helped even if feelings to protect her are born inside Machida. Leaving aside this new love story, the real problem right now is the exam. Just like us, the other classes probably understand as well. They must have already talked about it like we have, and must know whether the "target" is in their class or not.

"Now, I've been thinking about it since last night. But, I think we should now discuss with each other a way to find out who the "target" is" Ichinose says. "That again? I've already told you there are people you cannot negotiate with. And without us participating, there's no way you can discover the "target" right?" words that mock Ichinose like that came from Class A. "I don't think so, I think it's a matter of trust here. And that's why today, we will be playing cards with everyone. Of course I won't make it compulsory so only willing people should join" Ichinose then continues while taking out a deck of cards with a smile.

"Hahahahaha, building trust with a card game? That's stupid" Class A continues their mockery. "You may think that, but if you try it it's surprisingly fun. It's going to be a long hour to be spending alone in silence. It's fine if you won't feel bored though" Ichinose says in reply and as usual, Class B all voices their consent to Ichinose. "I shall also participate. I'm free anyways" Sotomura adds. But of course it seems nobody else is willing to consent to Ichinose's plan so I raise my hand lightly and offer my consent to her.

"So it's the five of us then. For now I'm thinking of playing Daifugo. Is there anyone who doesn't understand the rules here?" Ichinose asks us.

Of course, to a certain extent, I do understand the rules of card games too. Daifugo included. There seemed to be no problems with everyone else too and so the game smoothly started. The others not involved in the game are either disinterested in us or sending us glances from time to time. Ichinose then proceeded to shuffle the cards which were evenly divided up between the five of us. I have a Joker, 2 and 3 of Clubs. It seems a pretty intense hand has formed. My hand would currently overwhelm most other players but in Daifugo, you can't say for sure the stronger hand always wins. A revolution can occur and weaken your hand and send you spiraling into a loss.

But there's no denying the fact my hand currently gives me an advantage. I should come up with a solid strategy to utilize this hand. I have to admit, playing cards is a much deeper experience than I ever imagined. Not to mention each player's personality is highlighted in the game. Ichinose, for instance, is not fighting with her own hand only but also carefully analyzing the other players and using their pace to her advantage. Hamaguchi is betting everything on the endgame. It seems their strategies each reflect their personalities. "One more time!" Sotomura shouted. Sotomura, who is usually very knowledgeable with otaku related topics, I had expected to exhibit a much calmer personality. But it seems he's the type to get angry when he starts losing. But he also seems to be the type to quickly cool off since he returned to normal once the game ended.

I think this is probably what Ichinose was hoping for. To scout out the personalities and characteristics of the players. Of course it only helped a bit, and the dialogue with the rest of the group is still not occurring. But

that would mean not only Sotomura, but she could have also been scouting my behaviour.

From Ichinose's perspective, I wonder how I would be seen. From an objective standpoint...I'm sure as a truly dull man. Active with a good hand yet passive with a bad one. I must seem like a very common sort of man. This approach is better than adapting to the game and throwing Ichinose's observations into disarray. And so we continued to play cards, starting from Daifugo and by the end we had even played Old Maid. And by the time we finished, an hour had already passed. Neither Class A nor Class C joined in, and by the end of it all, only the five of us had participated in the games from start to finish.

"That was fun, sometimes it is good to play it the old-fashioned way" Sotomura said, seemingly more happy from playing cards than having to sit through an hour of discussion.

But just by repeating these games like some sort of psychological warfare tactic, I still cannot see what Class B's true aims are here. I'm sure that's something only Ichinose knows.

"Then...I'll be taking my leave". "Where are you going?". "I can't allow Class A to get away like this after all". "So you're heading off to go see Katsuragi-kun?". It looks like Ichinose is planning on making direct contact with the man who planned Class A's closed fortress strategy. Even though I normally am not the social type of person, I should take advantage of this flow. "If it's ok with you, can I tag along with you?" I ask her.

"Of course I'm completely fine with it, perhaps Ayanokouji-kun is also interested in Katsuragi-kun?" Ichinose asks me. It's not like she was being cautious of me, but genuinely curious as she tilted her head while asking me. "That's not the case, it's just Horikita is also in the same group as Katsuragi" I answer her.

"I see, I see. Then let's go together, shall we? See you later, Hamaguchi-kun" Ichinose said goodbye as she left with me, nodding as if convinced of my reasoning. Hamaguchi sees her off. Despite seeing Ichinose as their leader, it seems Hamaguchi is also capable of taking individual action. This is very different from the king-subject relationship Katsuragi and Ryuen take with their class.

As long as the discussions are ongoing at the same time, the time of dissolution should also be the same. Ichinose quickened her pace through the corridor to arrive before the (Dragon) group dissolved their meeting. "Let's hurry, ok?" she tells me. And with that declaration, Ichinose quickly walks to the destination in a slight hurry. Since the rooms are all located on the same floor, it is possible to quickly traverse the distance between one group's room to another. It is only one or two minutes since the discussion period ended, and the students on the floor are still sparse. And soon I arrived in front of the (Dragon) group's room.

Of course we could not hear the voices of the people inside, but we could still feel their presence and so we stopped in front of the room.

Perhaps the fact that no one is coming out means that there is a lengthy discussion ongoing in there. I did send her a chat, but it was still not marked as 'read' by Horikita. "It looks like they're taking their time". "Hard to imagine Ryuen and Katsuragi holding a discussion with each other. Or perhaps this is Class B's power showing itself?". "I wonder, Kanzaki-kun isn't the type to take the spotlight like that though...and speaking of which Horikita-san and the others are Class D right? It seems Class D also has a considerably remarkable lineup there" Ichinose says to me in reply.

It's not only Horikita, there's also Hirata and Kushida, I thought. And about 10 minutes after the allocated time, the door of the (Dragon)

group's room finally opened. The first person who came out of the room was the one Ichinose was looking for, Katsuragi. Several students from Class A followed behind him. Having noticed Ichinose, Katsuragi turned to face her.

"Ichinose, what are you doing here? This isn't a coincidence right?". "There's something I'd like to discuss with Katsuragi-kun. Do you have some time?" she asks him. "The exam's interval is a long one. There's nothing for me to do anyways so there's more than enough time" he tells her. As expected, he did not ignore Ichinose, Class B's leader, and was responsive to her questions. Having understood Katsuragi's intent, the students at his back went ahead and left without him. "There's no problem if only I stay behind right?" he asks Ichinose.

Nodding, Ichinose quickly moves aside towards the walls so as to not disturb the passerbys. Having managed to join into the conversation, I stand by Ichinose's side. And from Katsuragi's perspective, having just me as the sole observer seemed to be acceptable and he did not say anything.

"Judging from our discussions, I can more or less understand Katsuragi-kun's strategy. You forbade all the Class A students in the groups from talking, right? If so, would you reconsider that decision of yours? This current exam revolves around dialogue, doesn't it?" Ichinose asks Katsuragi. Three times now in our discussions, Class A stubbornly kept their silence. And that sort of fortress isn't something Ichinose can break apart in one stroke. To Ichinose, this must be an opportunity to break down that defense. Now, let's see Katsuragi's response. "A reasonable request. But that's something I've tired many times over since yesterday, to the point I think you're late in asking me this, Ichinose" he replies.

It seems Katsuragi's strategy has received far more attention than expected. "I had my own circumstances to consider, in any case Katsuragi-kun, would you reconsider your strategy of keeping silent?" Ichinose asks him. Katsuragi seemed to be considering the complaints raised against him by the other three classes. "The answer's the same no matter who asks, this is a strategy I made to win. And there is a reasoning behind it as well. You say this exam revolves around dialogue. But if there's something I disagree with, it's that. This exam tests 'thinking'. It would be problematic if you misunderstood that aspect of the exam. That's why considering the exam, I decided to prohibit discussion. There's no problem there" Katsuragi responds to Ichinose. "But Katsuragi-kun, that's like saying you reject the exam itself" Ichinose replies.

"My words may be blunt, but they're not wrong. Not just this exam, but the ones to come as well. I'll be looking for ways to achieve results without doing anything. I'll be playing for keeps for Class A's current position. I believe there's nothing wrong with that" he tells her.

"Yes if this were a direct competition between classes, Katsuragi-kun has the right idea but in a mixed class exam like this, is this really the right way to do things?" Ichinose asks him. Ichinose contacted Katsuragi to attempt to change his opinion but this time it seems Katsuragi has made the right call. There are only four possible outcomes to this exam. Students can opt to clear the exam through any one of those outcomes. Not interested in the struggle between classes, Katsuragi seems to be focusing only on leading Class A through this exam. "Further discussion is pointless, Ichinose. You should know I'm not changing my decision" he tells her.

"To break a mountain without moving an inch, is that it?" Ichinose remarked with a bitter smile. Having seen no sign of him giving up, it

seems she has understood Katsuragi won't be on board with our idea. I did expect this sort of outcome from the start somewhat. "Are you still going to struggle?". "Of course, that's the point of this exam". Ichinose and Katsuragi. Two powerful elites clashing with each other directly. "I'm sorry but I can already see the results of this exam. As long as we of Class A refuse to cooperate, your actions will be severely limited. There will be no chance of you winning". Indeed, even with three classes perfectly united, this exam is not an easy thing to clear. As soon as the identity of the "target" is revealed, somebody is bound to turn traitor. As long as the traitor stands to gain something from it, cooperation will be difficult to maintain to the end.

If the reward is not evenly and fairly distributed, there would also be no point in cooperating as well after all.

"Tell me something. If you were the leader of Class A, wouldn't you have used the same strategy as I did?" Katsuragi asks Ichinose. "I wonder, I still haven't seen things from the perspective of Class A after all. If you're in a position to be hunted like that, shouldn't it be after you've had lots of experience being hunted? Running from the start's a difficult thing".

As if hearing nonsense, Katsuragi closed his eyes and crossed his arms and then finally crossed eyes with Ichinose once again. "This is just my personal image, but I think if we were in the same position, you too would have foregone dialogue and chose the same strategy I did. If it's to protect my class, I do no mind receiving criticism from other classes at all" Katsuragi says with the assumption Ichinose shares the same conviction as him.

And Ichinose simply smiles softly in response to his assessment of her. "Sorry for taking up your time, I think I understand now. Your feelings and your way of thinking" she tells him. "Good to hear. Excuse me". Ichinose

did not move an inch as she saw off Katsuragi. "This exam, it's really easy when you play defense, huh? I shouldn't have done something unnecessary" Ichinose says. On that front, only the classes in desperate need of points would have to desperately uncover hints. But even then there is a huge risk. Removing the "target" could cause trouble to the class as well.

"Even so, Kanzaki-kun and the others aren't coming out yet". Even though Katsuragi and Class A left first, the others aside from them have yet to show themselves. 1 hour was the minimum amount of time required for discussion, but discussion beyond that point is not prohibited after all. "Are you going to wait for Kanzaki?" I ask Ichinose.

"Ayanokouji-kun's also waiting for Horikita-san, right? I'd like to hear what they have to say too, let's wait together". She can talk to Kanzaki whenever she wants, but my opportunity to talk with Horikita is limited. Since Katsuragi brushed her off, she might also want to hear the opinions of the other classes too. But from the start, I don't think there is a way to break through Katsuragi's strategy in the first place. And from that point onwards, we waited for around 30 minutes and the door to the (Dragon) group's room finally opened. The ones that came out where the students of Class C except for Ryuen, there was also Kushida and Hirata.

"Hmm? Ayanokouji-kun, what are you doing here? Are you waiting for Horikita-san?". Having seen me, Kushida approached me strangely. The memory of what happened with her yesterday came up in my mind and my body stiffened immediately. But it seems Kushida is still the same as usual and hasn't shown any signs of change. It's a bit unfortunate. "Hello, Kushida-san". "Uwaa, it's Ichinose-san. Hello. This was unexpected, and a strange combination". It seems like Kushida doesn't know we were acquainted and couldn't quite hide her surprise.

"I'm waiting for Horikita-san and Kanzaki-kun but are they still talking inside?" she asks Kushida. "Those two are still talking with Ryuen-kun it seems like. You could enter". Kushida gestures towards the door as if inviting us in. "It's ok, it's ok. I can wait if they're still in the middle of discussion". "Isn't it fine? The exam's limit is only 1 hour. Anything beyond that you're free to enter and leave as you please. Besides, you don't know if they're still taking about the exam or not". And with a slightly pushy attitude, Kushida opens the door and forces us in. Since I was forced in and with no reason to refuse, I entered together with Ichinose. My eyes met Hirata's for a moment.

And in the room, three people were sitting slightly apart from each other. It almost seemed like a three states situation. But it was not a tense atmosphere I felt but a more relaxed one. The moment we intruders set foot in the room, their gazes immediately turned towards us. Horikita and Kanzaki did not show much of a change in their expressions, but Ryuen seemed to have found something funny as he laughed. And then he raises his hand and called to Ichinose.

"Yo. Did you come all the way here for some reconnaissance? Don't be shy, have a seat". "This is certainly an interesting combination. I'm very intereseted to hear what you've been talking about after the required hour". "Kuku, of course. Originally, you must've thought you'd be in Kanzaki's place. But the fact of it is, you belong to a different group. And a small team with the bare essentials at that. Or perhaps that's just the sort of person you are" he tells Ichinose.

"Come on, Ryuen-kun. The placements were decided by the school, how could I have known? We're just fighting based on the information and the situation we've been given. The way you're saying it sounds like it's reversed and the school intentionally grouped us?".

Ichinose acts as if she hasn't realized or noticed anything, but Ryuuen isn't the type of man to believe in something like that. While laughing, he quickly moves and closes the distance between himself and Ichinose. And it seems he hasn't even realized my presence. But, personally I liked it better that way. "If you haven't realized it yet then I'll tell you. In this exam, those bunch of teachers intentionally decided on the groups. That much is obvious. That also means that there is a reason you were excluded from this group despite being the leader of B" Ryuuen tells Ichinose.

"Hmm. So it's not random but predetermined grouping huh? I knew Ryuuen-kun's group was made up entirely of extremely gifted people, but it seems other groups are also decided like that. Thanks for your information. But, is it ok? Giving me information like that?" she asks him. Ichinose's reply like that should have been expected, but I did not miss the change in Ryuuen's facial expression. Normally, upon hearing facts one should not have known about, there would be surprise, anxiety or doubt. But without missing a beat, Ichinose had thanked him for his information. That was not a natural response. Of course, looking at it from the perspective of the other party, Ichinose's reaction must have made it seem as though she had known this truth all along but was merely hiding the fact. Even if he does not know this for a fact, the possibility that he's gleamed this information off her by instinct alone is also high. It was only a brief conversation, but both parties seemed to have gleamed quite a bit of information off each other.

In this case, whether Ichinose noticed the intentional groupings by the school's side is unimportant. What's important is 'why', if she realized, she decided to keep silent on the matter. That's what a struggle to read each other's moves means. "But even so...". And with an exasperated face, Ryuuen finally turned to face me. "I too, like to chase after a woman's ass. But you're even worse than that aren't you? First Suzune, and now Ichinose. You're always hanging off a woman's ass" he tells me.

Of course that was not my intention, but now that I think about it, he's not wrong either and I cannot deny that.

It's not like Ryuen's being particularly interested in me, since he doesn't say anything more after that.

"You've come at a good time, Ichinose. I have an interesting proposal to make to you". "Proposal? In any case I'll hear you out. But what is it?". "It's pointless talk. A waste of time to even lend him your ear". Seemingly having already heard that proposal, Horikita quickly cut in as if to prevent it. "It's a proposal to work together and crush Class A together. But it seems Suzune and Kanzaki have rejected me" he says. "What do you mean?". "I've told Suzune about it earlier, but I already know the identities of all the Class C "targets" you see". And just like how Katsuragi had Katsuragi's own strategy. Now it seems to be Ryuen's turn to speak of his own strategy.

It seems we've evolved beyond the stage we were at in the morning already.

"Three classes will combine forces and share information, that includes the identities of all the "targets" as well and bypass the school's rules for this exam". So that's what the three classes alliance would mean. "That's quite a bold idea. But how realistic it is is a completely different matter. In the first place, how can we trust that Ryuen-kun already knows the "targets" for Class C?". "You can't trust me and that's only natural. Then we don't we make a contract in this case? A pledge to share the "target" identities between us and gang up on A. That way, leaving A aside, three classes would have effectively formed a siege against it".

But this is a strategy that seems likely to collapse if Class A refuses to play along. "Even if we write up a contract, without knowing who's going

to betray you, it's still meaningless. It's all over if Class C betrays us". Horikita's statement like that was the natural follow up to such a proposal. From the information I've gathered myself, it seems Ryuen's already formed an alliance with Class A for quite some time. And during the island test, Ryuen has shown his propensity for betrayal. The fact that Katsuragi did not raise a single complaint against it shows how well this guy does his job.

The strategy itself is not such a bad one, however, the fact that Ryuen is the one who proposed it is the problem. "What Horikita-san says is reasonable, but unless we also know the identities of the "targets" like Ryuen-kun, this is a meaningless proposal". "No point in playing dumb, there's no way you haven't been analyzing the classes as well" Ryuen retorts to Ichinose. Both of them had smiles on their faces, but the atmosphere between them had changed slightly like needles pricking your skin all over.

"You're overestimating me. I've done no such thing, and besides, this proposal is very high-risk low-return. I'm afraid I cannot accept it" Ichinose tells Ryuen. "There's a time for secrets, and there's a time for actions". "It may be so from your point of view, but now that you're gathering information so aggressively. Is it not your dream to rise up to Class B that way?". "Horikita-san from Class D also opposes it. From the start, there was no way this proposal would be accepted". "That can't be helped, Suzune has a reason to decline the proposal after all".

"What's that supposed to mean" Horikita asks Ryuen. "You understand, don't you? For this strategy to work, you'd need to perfectly understand your own class firstly. And for Class D which has no teamwork at all, that's an impossible task. Right? And it's also impossible for Class A which is currently split into two factions" he replies. The

atmosphere changes once again, and now it feels like a cloudy atmosphere had descended upon the room.

"But for me, who rules the class and the incredibly popular Ichinose, this strategy is possible. Right now I proposed a three class alliance, but even if it's just two classes it's still possible. The probability of seeing through the rules of the exam may decrease slightly, but if it's me I can certainly pull it off. If I can do it, both A and D might as well be stripped nude" Ryuuen says. To discover the "targets" of Class A and Class D by working together as two classes. That was Ryuuen's proposal.

The fact that Ryuuen boldly proposed this strategy to Class B asking for their cooperation in front of Horikita, me, Kushida and Class D itself is incomprehensible and disturbing. Even if this strategy is not perfect, it seems Ryuuen would be able to gain something by knowing the identities of the class's "targets" and would reach that point in just a step further. If so, this will be a vital moment for Class D. "This might be unnecessary words, but doesn't that mean your strategy is still imperfect?". I had thought she would simply observe here but right now Horikita's stance seems to be one marking him as an enemy. Even if Ichinose decides to ally with Class D instead, we still don't know how far we can trust her.

And considering that, it would be an extremely fatal mistake to allow Ichinose to form a connection with Ryuuen here. "Do you understand the situation now, orbiter?" Ryuuen laughs at me as if attempting to mock me, but I decided against keeping quiet and replied with my honest opinion.

"If Class B and C form an alliance here, naturally this time Class A and D would form an alliance too, wouldn't you say? I admit Class D is fractured right now, but once the possibility of losing becomes a reality, I believe it'll come together. It's the same for Class A too". "It's not like I'm allying with Ichinose at this moment anyways. So unless you can

ascertain the fact that such an alliance has formed, I doubt Katsuragi would cooperate with you" Ryuuen replies to me. Admittedly, Katsuragi is a cautious man who will not accept such ambiguous negotiations. However, since he had also suffered at the hands of Ryuuen, there is still room to reason with him. After what I said, it seems Horikita has also realized that this proposal would not work. "There's no point in this dialogue. We'll eventually be at each other's throats anyways" she said. "What might you mean by that, Suzune?". "All I mean is that he has a point. If you intend on continuing this discussion like a strategy meeting. I'll have to assume 'this is reality' and act accordingly as well" Horikita says in reply. "As you wish, I'm anxious to see whether you manage to form a cooperative relationship or not, eh?" Ryuuen says that as he randomly spouts hostility towards his enemies while at the same time, brazenly extending an offer of cooperation towards them as well.

Horikita responds with a determination to fight in response to that. This is certainly a deterrence aimed towards Ichinose. If she betrays Class D now, she will be viewed as a traitor by all the other classes as well. A person who betrays even her allies at the drop of a hat for the sake of points. If such a reputation were to be stuck to Ichinose now, it will pull her leg for the rest of her long high school life.

"I'm sorry Ryuuen-kun, but there were also people in Class B who were hurt by your actions. Even if it's for the sake of gaining points, I cannot cooperate that easily with you". "I see, that's unfortunate" Ryuuen tells Ichinose. But his face shows he expected this outcome from the start and was not disappointed in the least. Ryuuen then stood to leave the room and passed by us. As he left, Ryuuen turned around just once to look at me. Perhaps he did it unconsciously, but his gaze landed on my face. "...it can't be" he whispered and left. I, of course, did not react to those words of his.

As Ryuuen shook his head and left, Kushida also spoke up. "I have to leave now too, my friend is calling me". Apologizing like that, Kushida quickly left the room after Ryuuen. "It looks like he saw through us there". Ichinose slightly sighed. "This is going to be troublesome, being targeted by someone like that". "Even though he has the kanji for dragon in his name, he's a snake through and through. Once he's set his sights on his prey, he'll go to any lengths to devour said prey. But rather than me right now, it's Horikita-san he's set his sights on. Right now Ryuuen is most wary of Class A, and he should be aware of the fact that Class B would also be his enemies one day too" Ichinose says.

That is true, Class D had only risen up from the depths it had sunk into after the recent island test. Perhaps it is a result of that, but none of the other classes are seeing Class D as that severe of a threat yet. "It should be fine, Horikita is not the type to crumble under pressure" I tell her. "Of course". I did say that, but there is still the possibility that Horikita may yet evolve from the pressure put on her here. This much I am certain of. Whether it's now or ten years from now, if you are going to evolve as a person, generally you need to be broken down first.

"Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun. Since people now know about the alliance between our classes so I'll ask just in case, but do you believe in this exam, an alliance that transcends classes can truly be formed?" Ichinose asks us. "There's no real need for hostility here, but asking for cooperation might just be a bit difficult. The exam itself is set up so that two classes cooperating perfectly would be impossible. That's why absolute, unwavering cooperation between Class B and Class D is a necessity. I don't think such an alliance could be formed". "Umm. As expected of Horikita-san. You understand the exam perfectly it seems. Ryuuen-kun's idea was infeasible from the start. It was a good move allying with you" Ichinose tells Horikita, seemingly happy that their ideas seem to have matched perfectly.

"Yes. Ryuen-kun's strategy will end in failure. There's no need to even worry about that. The problem is the strategy set up by Katsuragi-kun. Having spoken to him yourself, what do you think?" Ichinose asks Kanzaki and Horikita regarding Katsuragi. "As I reported to you yesterday, there's no room for the other groups to talk to them. He doesn't respond to us and refuses to participate in discussions as well. I don't believe he'll change his stance before the exam ends. Is the stance the same even without Katsuragi present?" Kanzaki asks Ichinose. "Yeah. It's hopeless on my end as well. Looks like we'll have to compromise in this situation with a different approach". The number of discussion periods left is three. And after that each group will have to submit their answers individually.

That's when we'll have to make a choice. For the class or for the group? Or perhaps only for yourself?. "I'll be returning to my room then". Since everyone from the (Dragon) group had left the room, Horikita also moves to return to her room. At that moment, Ichinose met up with Hamaguchi who seemed to have been waiting outside for her. Ichinose glanced briefly at the departing back of Horikita, and then turned back to look at me. "If it's ok with you, would you accompany me for a bit?" Ichinose asks me. "Sure. That's fine". Right now it's not just Ichinose but also two other students from Class B with me so it felt slightly cramped.

Then upon parting ways with Kanzaki and arriving on the deck, we were suddenly greeted with the figures of students who had already switched into a fun mood. "Horikita-san may have said that, but I still believe we can all work together and there's still room for cooperation" Ichinose finally tells me.

"Room for cooperation?". "Yes, Class A suddenly took that stance and I was surprised but there's still room for cooperation. That's why we need to expose everything, don't you agree?" she asks me. "All?". "At the end of the day, this exam is mainly about finding the "target". So that means all we'd have to do is figure out as many non-"targets" as possible to

narrow down the possibility. That's why I'll tell you...I'm not the "target". But I will find them, and I'll bring our 'group' to victory" Ichinose clearly tells me while looking deep into my eyes. And added this. "If you still doubt that I'm the "target" and I'm simply hiding, even if you ask me that my response to that is simple...I'm doing everything I can for Class B". Those words pierced me with a mysterious aura I couldn't seem to quite figure out.

Having observed Ichinose's behaviour so far, there's only one thing left to question her about. If she truly wanted to ask my cooperation here and now and wish to gain absolute trust from me she should have gone one step further. That is to say, reveal the contents of her phone to me to ascertain that she is not the "target". But Ichinose is showing no signs of doing so, I didn't even notice any signs of her attempting to take out her phone. So should I take her statement as the ramblings of a mentally ill woman? Or as a story that still has a hidden side to it? That was the reason for the mysterious aura. It may yet be the wise decision to honestly accept her offer here now.

"...is it absurd?" Ichinose anxiously asks me after receiving only silence from me. "No, sorry. It's not that absurd of a proposition. I was just surprised that you would be so honest with me. Normally, one would not attempt to bring the entire 'group' to victory if they truly were the "target" after all". "I won't use lies in a place like this. I would have if I needed to during the exam, but as much as I can, I try to be honest" she tells me. "Everything I've told you so far, I intend to do to allow my class to win fair-and-square. I just thought to find the "target" to see if they share the same idea. Ah, Ayanokouji-kun doesn't need to answer if you don't want to. I just wanted to let you know my feelings. I thought it would be easier if we were on the same page" she says. "Although perfect cooperative relationships might be impossible, it's still a good idea to maintain good relations. If I don't answer you honestly here, this relationship might crumble down the line" I answer her. "No, no. No such thing". She tried to

stop me from answering her in a panic, but this isn't something I should conceal here.

What Ichinose says is undoubtedly true, the price she gains from betraying me here is small. There's no point in deceiving Class D which had already sunken to the bottom and is barely rising again now. Of course, I cannot say for certain she is being 100% honest just like how one cannot be 100% certain they won't get hit by an asteroid and die. But I think I can afford to be honest with her here too. "I'm not the "target". Neither is Yukimura. I'm certain about Yukimura. But I don't know about Karuizawa and Sotomura. And personally, I agree with you Ichinose. No objections" I tell her.

I did hear from Yukimura that neither Sotomura and Karuizawa seem to be the "target" as well, but I'd best leave such uncertain statements out of this conversation. I still cannot say they are not "targets" with confidence. And judging from his attitude and his behaviour, what Yukimura confided in me is certainly true. Yukimura is not the "target". "S-sorry. I seem to have forced you to talk". Ichinose then lowers her head before me as if overcome by guilt. But there's no need to apologize. Because one day, it's 'I' who should be apologizing to her for what I'm about to do. "Hamaguchi-kun, could you come here for a moment?".

"What's the matter, Ichinose-san?". When Hamaguchi approached, Ichinose began informing him of the current situation. After listening to her, he seemed surprised that Ichinose managed to build a cooperative relationship with Class D. I thought Ichinose's personality alone would've gotten her the approval of the class. "If he's confirmed it himself too, there's no reason for me to refuse it. I'm also not the "target". It's ok to trust me" Hamaguchi tells me. And considering his relationship with Ichinose, his credibility is also pretty high. There's very little merit in lying here because it could ruin her relationship with Horikita if exposed after

all. "So you haven't checked your class yet" I asked her. If it's the Ichinose who's burning with popularity, she could have gotten the information from her class even without using a reign of terror like Ryuuen did.

"I try to let my classmates take individual action. That sort of thing. There are those that just want points for themselves. It's not like I can just decide the "target" amongst them of my own accord anyways" Ichinose says. "It might be hard but I'll check the remaining one. If they answer honestly, I'll let Ayanokouji-kun know of it afterwards". "I'm grateful for that. But it's not like I'll tell you everything about Class D. We still can't say we've established a positive relationship just yet and there's still no guarantee that what you've just told me is the truth" I tell Ichinose. "That's fine. As long as Ayanokouji-kun alone cooperates with me I'll be satisfied with just that".

And with this, the three of us discussed the exam from a neutral standpoint and cooperation within the (Rabbit) group has suddenly become a possibility. Me, Ichinose, Hamaguchi and Yukimura. The four of us are certainly not the "target". I can be sure of Yukimura at least by observing his behaviour and attitude. That leaves 10 other people aside from us. The "target" is undoubtedly hiding amongst those 10. In any case it's bound to be a more difficult task than finding the leader during the island test. That is precisely why this is an exam. The "target" will also feel the pressure on them and as long as they avoid taking open action, they can keep themselves concealed. It seemed unfair at first but the school did make sure to balance out the exam.

"So? How do you intend to find the "target" from here on out? Even if we ask directly, I doubt they would name themselves honestly. It's not like they can be persuaded with words alone like the three of us" Hamaguchi says to us. "The point of this exam is to do something about

that, right?". Exactly, this is an exam of the highest caliber. To extract information from a person desperately attempting to keep it hidden. Now with Ichinose making her move, a change in the current situation will inevitably occur.

2

Unless one is an esper capable of reading minds, finding the "target" won't be an easy task. People are all born liars and are mostly used to lying. If a person that has never lied even once in their lives exists, that existence itself would be a lie. For humans, lies are an inseparable part of ourselves. At the very least, among the people gathered in this room, one of them is the "target". There is still time until the discussion proper starts, however, the reason I came early like last time was to observe the behaviour of everyone in the group. And the first ones who arrived for the night's discussion were the girls of Class C. They came in while gleefully chatting away with each other. Upon seeing me, they instantly lowered their voices in a disgusted manner and quickly distanced themselves from me.

Next was Yukimura, who entered the room with a sharp-looking face. Casually greeting me with a glance, he soon sat down near me. He didn't seem to be any different from usual. Then next came the Class A group. Machida and Takemoto. And then Morishige. As usual, since they have decided to keep their silence, they decided to sit at the far end of the room. Close to where the Class C girls were sitting. "Hey Machida-kun, today after this is over, do you want to come play with us? The three of us girls are planning on having fun after this, but haven't found someone yet". "Let's see..." Machida replied to them.

Machida usually does not participate in the discussion, but his 'presence' is still strong. Leaving aside Ichinose and Ibuki, it seems all the other girls in the group are interested in him. It's not like I'm jealous of him

or anything...but I may be slightly jealous of him. Either Class C had half given up on finding the "targets" or perhaps this is still a part of their plan, but with those words they had invited Machida out to play with them. Is this how men and women deepen their relationships? It seems Machida is also satisfied with that as he looked happy while considering their invitation. Then Sotomura and Karuizawa entered the room. But rather than together, it seemed like they just happened to arrive in the room at the same time, as Karuizawa had a displeased look on her face. As soon as they entered the room, she quickly put some distance between them and moved towards the back of the room.

"Hey. That's my seat". Despite having arrived later, Karuizawa tells that to the Class C girls while glaring at them even though they arrived earlier. After seeing the other girls flirting openly with Machida, it seems Karuizawa became even more angry at them. "Don't know what you're on about, but what's your seat? Just find somewhere else to sit" Manabe told Karuizawa. "I said that's my seat. Move" she replied. "Huh? Can't you see I'm talking to Machida-kun right now? We're going to be playing tonight" Manabe tells Karuizawa. "Machida-kun, please tell her yourself. That you want me sitting next to you" Karuizawa asks Machida. Looking slightly embarrassed, Machida seemed to be torn on who to choose. But Karuizawa soon understood the situation, and quickly got in between Manabe and Machida, and held Machida's hand.

"This time, let's play together. Just the two of us. Or have you chosen that girl? I hate womanizers, so if you're going to play with that girl I won't go out with you" Karuizawa tells Machida. I was honestly surprised she would say something like that so boldly while going out with Hirata. In fact, Machida seemed to be attracted to the words "just the two of us" and had already decided which girl to choose. "Could you please move? That's where Karuizawa sits. Even this afternoon too" Machida tells Manabe. "Huh? What's that supposed to mean? Annoying...". Saying those words with face that said likewise, the Class C girls moved away

from Machida. And so Karuizawa quickly moved into that empty space and sat down. In fact, she sat down so close it was almost as if she were glued to Machida. Honestly, their bodies were already connected at this point.

Perhaps the only reason people did not think those actions were frivolous was because people already knew what Karuizawa was like. Perhaps he doesn't know she is going out with Hirata, or perhaps he does, but it seems Machida has begun to open up his heart to Karuizawa, or has already fallen in love with her. If we're only talking about appearances, Karuizawa is indeed cute, and if you look at her from the perspective of liking her, it is also possible that protective feelings would be born inside of you. The interesting thing is, the group that was just formed yesterday, had already begun to develop its own hierarchy of power and ecosystem just today. A loner is a loner while a popular person will remain popular even so.

The partitioning of the students into hierarchies is already complete. But this partitioning is not done the usual way. For instance, if two people happen to share the same status in the group, inevitably one would rise and the other would fall in status. It could even be described as a 'survival of the fittest' environment. And the one that loses in said competition would be demoted to a lower rank amongst their peers. Perhaps even to the bottom of the ladder. To the point where their existence would not matter one point even if they weren't there. For example, someone like me in this case. The interesting thing about this exam is that it forces people who had competed against each other earlier to join hands. Even Ichinose, who is extremely popular amongst her class, has trouble influencing her enemies in this class. If it were Hirata, perhaps he might have been able to organize this into a more proper group?

"Let's get along today too!" Ichinose herself arrived and brought life back into the dispirited room. I also immediately realized the atmosphere in the room is especially thick today and chose to not speak carelessly. But even so, Karuizawa's actions seemed too forceful and incomprehensible to me. If she wanted to get closer to Machida, she did not need to antagonize the Class C girls to do so. I just felt---that this event and the exam itself had no direct connection. As someone who had been watching Karuizawa since the start of the first semester, I can tell after observing her personality and her actions. That Karuizawa wants to stand at the top. Of course, she's not such a talented person that she can rise to the top of the girls group like that. She lacks the talent of Ichinose and something like that would normally be impossible for her.

But there is such a thing as 'human relationships' that come into play here. It is a fact that Karuizawa with a strong personality became the leader of Class D's girls. Furthermore, she became the girlfriend of Hirata, the guiding force of the class and gained influence with the boys as well. If one applies Karuizawa's behaviour then to this instance, the truth becomes clearer. She attaches herself to the strongest man she can find such as Machida and gains influence in the group that way. It works, in fact, the Class C girls who were unable to overpower Machida's influence were already reluctantly going back to their own seats. Karuizawa accepts the risk of being hated in exchange for absolute domination.

For a sense of superiority?

For self-satisfaction?

Or just craving the spotlight?

I still cannot see the root cause of this behaviour, but evidently something along those lines was responsible for her actions. "This isn't good". "Yeah, if we continue like this, we'll be allowing the "target" to get

away". The one who answered my murmur was Yukimura, who happened to be sitting next to me. It would be awkward for me to correct him on the subject so I went along with the flow.

"Let's see, let's see. Class A isn't going to join in the discussions as usual. Right?". "Of course. Please feel free to continue the discussion without us. Our stance has not changed". The student sitting next to Machida who made that statement that had been concealing his emotions the entire time was Morishige. I've seen him before this exam. According to what I have heard, Class A currently is divided up between two factions. The Katsuragi Faction and the Sakayanagi Faction. Morishige was one of those who betrayed Katsuragi during the island test. While he would not normally listen to Katsuragi's orders obediently like this, Sakayanagi is absent from this cruise due to ill health and without someone to give him orders directly, he had no choice but to follow Katsuragi's orders it seems.

I expected Katsuragi to instantly lose influence in the class after his failure during the island test but it seems he won't go down that easily. Since he too had been keeping his silence for two days now, it seems even Morishige believes he has no choice but to endure Katsuragi's orders. "Since it'll be a waste to spend an hour like this, shall we play cards again?" Ichinose says as though she had grown used to this as she proposed a game of cards after the initial confirmation. In this exam, there are different approaches that can be taken, but Ichinose seems to want to find the "target" through dialogue while Katsuragi took the opposite approach by preventing all dialogue.

On the other hand, Ryuen's strategy is turn everyone into an enemy while taking absolute control of his own class. But I can't be sure those are their individual strategies until the curtain falls. After all, it would be impossible to talk about that while playing cards for one whole hour.

Yukimura seemed to be desperately scanning the surroundings but he doesn't seem to have a grasp on who the "target" could be. I'm sure it's the same for the other students as well and that is surely the conclusion they have all reached. Even if dialogue were to be successful, it is unlikely the "target" would name themselves. Once the hour had passed, I observe the order in which the students leave the room.

The students of Class C who were always one of the first out the door do not seem to be leaving yet while Class A, always the first to leave, did so as usual. However, it seems Machida and Karuizawa are busy exchanging their contact numbers with each other and making arrangements to contact each other. Then Yukimura and Sotomura got up to leave. "Let's go back, Ayanokouji you're leaving too right?". "Yeah". And at the same time, Karuizawa also stands to leave while talking to someone on the phone, seemingly chatting about something interesting. And as she leaves, the three girls from Class C also pass through us to follow her.

"Those three girls. Don't they seem a bit strange to you?". Yukimura seemed to have noticed something unusual about them and looked at me with a worried face. "Do you believe so? I have not noticed anything" Sotomura replies to him in a crazy tone of voice. Leaving aside Sotomura's opinion, Yukimura's intuition is correct. It seems the Class C girls are storing up quite a bit of anger in them as well. Yukimura and I slightly peak out of the room into the corridor outside. And we saw the three girls chasing Karuizawa swiftly in the corridor. I would rather not follow them alone. And Ibuki, who also seem to be disinterested in Karuizawa, is not there. "Might be a personal quarrel between them?" Yukimura looked at me as if to ask what to do.

"Let's follow them. It might not end up in violence but it might cause a bit of uproar". "Damn that Karuizawa, always doing things that makes

people hate her...even though I wanted to find the "target" myself". While Sotomura left to return to his room, Yukimura and I quickly followed the four girls quietly.

As I reached a corner, I heard the sound of a door slamming shut and saw the entrance to the emergency stairs closing. But there was no reason to use the emergency stairs unless the elevators were broken, which meant something else is happening here. "Hey, what're you doing bringing me to a place like this?". I quietly opened the door to the emergency staircase and heard a voice from inside. "Don't play dumb with us, you pushed Rika right? Start talking". "...w-w-why. Why are you accusing me? I told you you've got the wrong person didn't I?". The three girls then closed in on Karuizawa and drove her back to the wall as if to prevent her from escaping. But even in a situation like that, Karuizawa continued to deny the accusations without apologizing. Is it really not her then?. "I have something to do now, would you mind moving aside?".

"Then let me confirm it now. I'm going to call Rika now. If it's really not you, then I'll forgive you". "I don't know what you're talking about, I'll call the teachers". "What are you going to tell the teachers? It's not like we're using violence on you right now. If you tell them, we could also tell them you pushed Rika and make it a problem for you too". It seems like they have no intention of backing down as they grabbed Karuizawa's arms as she tried to escape and pushed her back towards the wall.

One of the girls then began using her phone to contact the girl named Rika. "W-wait a minute". Once she realized the situation was that serious, Karuizawa tried to stop them from making the call. "Why are you in such a hurry?". "...I just remembered. I accidentally bumped into that girl" Karuizawa quickly tells them. "You filthy liar, you remembered her from the start didn't you? I don't care either way, but you're going to apologize to Rika?". "No. She's the one in the wrong. She's an airheaded girl". I

thought Karuizawa would accept responsibility for it, but it seems she's as headstrong as ever. Despite knowing she would rile the Class C girls up even more she still said those words.

"She's really pissing me off. I was even thinking about forgiving her for her actions earlier if she apologized to Rika. Never mind, I'm not forgiving her now". And with that, she pushed Karuizawa's shoulder with the palm of her hand. "You weren't going to forgive her anyway from the start...right?". It was a girl named Yamashita who had always followed behind Manabe until now, that said that. "Shiho-chan, I can't hold back anymore. I really won't forgive Karuizawa". "I know right? I'm sure Rika shares the same feelings as you. Let's seriously bully her".

This time, with more force, she hit Karuizawa's shoulder with her palm again. Yukimura tried to open the door quickly, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him. Even if we stopped this now, Karuizawa will inevitably be assaulted again in the future. But allowing them to use violence to their heart's content right now will serve as a deterrent for them in the future. And depending on the degree of violence, it might even be possible to threaten them with contacting the school. And most importantly, right now Karuizawa Kei's existence is about to change.

"Ha...haaa". Karuizawa seemed to be having trouble breathing. Or perhaps she seems to be in pain. But she grabbed her head with both hands. But the sight of her suffering, instead of evoking empathy, brought forth more anger from Manabe and the other girls. "Even if you act all feminine like that I won't forgive you anymore". She then grabbed Karuizawa's hair and forcefully raised her head. "I always hated Karuizawa's face, don't you think she's really ugly?". "I know right? Do you want to cut up that face of hers?" one of the girls asked.



"S-s-stop". "S-stop, she's saying. What happened to that determination you had a while ago?". It would seem the more you hate your enemy, the more you seek to attack their advantages. If we're only talking about beauty, there's no doubt that Karuizawa is the better one. But it seems Manabe, Yamashita and Yabu won't be satisfied until they deny Karuizawa's appearance like that. After shaking silently, Karuizawa

became unable to move. There was no longer any trace of the usual her to be seen right now. The true nature of a person always comes out in a dilemma like this. A little more of this and soon I'll be able to see and know more of Karuizawa Kei.

But it seems Yukimura's sense of justice had kicked in, as he seems to be unable to hold it anymore. He then quickly opened the door with force and surprised the three girls inside. On the other hand, as though she had been saved, Karuizawa looked at Yukimura with a face of relief. "What are you doing?". "W-w-w-w-what? I was just talking with Karuizawa-san, right?". Manabe looked at Karuizawa with a threatening expression as if daring her to say a word, but Karuizawa isn't the sort of person to be intimidated by just that.

"Hey Yukimura-kun, do something. They abducted me violently out of the blue and started pushing me around. They're the worst right? They were annoying so I told them to leave me alone but". Normally Karuizawa would never care about Yukimura, but she's probably grateful to him now that he's appeared here to save her. Her face seemed to convey her relief. But Class C seemed to be hatefully glaring at Yukimura. Almost like saying this has nothing to do with Yukimura. "I'm just helping Rika with her Karuizawa problem. Since you came here you must have also heard the story right". "...I think you should let it go. If they just accidentally bumped into each other, it's not like Karuizawa's at fault you know". Yukimura had no choice but to answer like that.

"You shut up. This has nothing to do with you". ".....". Since he got told to shut up by the Class C girls, this time Yukimura had no choice but to obediently shut up. Karuizawa then started to look at Yukimura as if looking at a pathetic man while I slowly took out my phone quietly.

"Just leave me alone already. Otherwise I'll call for someone" Karuizawa tells them. "Call? Call who? Hirata-kun? Machida-kun? Or perhaps a prostitute like you can call as many men as you like". It is said that a fight between women is dirty, and cannot be resolved easily through violence like a man's conflict. As someone who had gotten himself involved in this, I found it painful to both look at and hear. "There was a teacher that passed by earlier, I think it's best if you left". Having no other choice, I stepped in and said those words to break the fight up. I'm sure Class C also does not wish to cause a scene here.

"I'm absolutely going to make you bow your head down before Rika". It was a threat to Karuizawa by the other side saying they would use any means necessary for that. Karuizawa desperately tried to act strong but it's obvious she's no longer capable of that. It seems the other girls have also sensed Karuizawa's weakness as they looked at Karuizawa from above with condescending looks. "Are you ok?". Unable to leave Karuizawa, who seemed to be hyperventilating, Yukimura asked her that.

"Leave me alone!". Karuizawa quickly slapped Yukimura's hand away as he moved in to help her. "What the hell? I came to help you because I was worried". "Shut up! Nobody asked you to do it" Karuizawa said while getting her breath back. Yukimura took a step back as if overwhelmed by her words. I also stepped back to not get involved in it but Karuizawa stared at me intensely with an angry expression before opening the door of the emergency staircase with force. And then slamming it shut behind her. "What the hell is her problem? Always causing trouble for us". I do understand Yukimura's feelings of resent towards her. A 'troublemaker' is a nice way to describe Karuizawa.

But it seemed he was also tired out by the ordeal, as Yukimura did not say anything more and left from the emergency staircase door as well.

Now alone on the emergency stairs, I thought about Karuizawa. And the vulnerable side the leader of the Class D girls had shown then.

The terrified appearance Karuizawa had just now was not only because she was being threatened at the time but due to something else.

3

Midnight after the second day had ended. The pool that was crowded during daytime was now silent. I was there to wait for a call to confirm a certain thing. Since the phones we were assigned after enrollment already had the contact numbers of the teachers added to them, it was an extremely simple task for me to contact Chabashira-sensei. Even though we were in the middle of summer, we're sailing right above the ocean's surface so the night wind was rather cold. "...sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokouji". "I don't really care. More importantly, sorry for calling you out this late". "It's a consultation from a student, as a teacher I have an obligation to respond. It's nothing strange. For better or for worse, this is your first time calling me out here alone".

Chabashira-sensei who does not handle Class D with love, is not very well-liked by the students even in flattery. Even if the students have a problem, they are unlikely to ask her for a consultation. "There's something I'd like to ask sensei...your face is looking quite pale". I didn't notice at first in the dark. But Chabashira-sensei had a deathly pale face.

"...don't worry about it. It's just adult things. So what's the matter?". I could more or less understand the situation since I could smell the alcohol coming from her breath. "In this school, you told me there's nothing that cannot be 'bought' with points. But there are exceptions correct?". "I suppose so, exceptions naturally exist. For example, if you

try to buy the lives of teachers and students with points we cannot allow that to happen".

"Then the most expensive thing ever bought with points in the past---". But before I finish my question, I quickly sensed the presence of an eavesdropper. "Ya-ha! Sae-chan. You feeling good?". It was Hoshinomiya-sensei that appeared. Was it just a coincidence? No, the probability of that is infinitely low. It would have been impossible for her to stumble onto this place without having tailed Chabashira-sensei.

"...aren't you drunk?". "Hmm? No of course not, there's no way I could be drunk. Are you perhaps playing dumb with me?". "Really...you can hold your liquor really well as usual. Both yesterday and today as well". Hoshinomiya-sensei kept her pace up and continued speaking. "Hello Ayanokouji-kun. Are you feeling well?". Acting overly familiar with me, she approached me, and acting overly familiar again, she puts her hands around my shoulders so close I could feel the alcohol coming from her breath. Of course someone underage like me wouldn't know, but is alcohol that good of a drink? Just by smelling it, I already feel like not drinking it.

"I'm fine. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't" I tell her. "A really impressive cute answer. So does Ayanokouji-kun like tsundere onee-sans like Sae-chan?" Hoshinomiya-sensei asked me. "Don't do that with students. It will interfere with our professional conduct". Thankfully, Chabashira-sensei grabbed Hoshinomiya-sensei by the nape and dragged her off me. I recall the conversation between teachers I heard yesterday. Even the teachers are wary of each other, competing with each other and deceiving each other to get to the top class.

I don't know whether that competition is meant to raise one's salary as a teacher, or if it's something carried over between Chabashira-sensei

and Hoshinomiya-sensei from their student days. I'm sure the school and the teachers do attempt to make the system a fair one. If information were to unfairly be leaked, that in itself would be a severe problem. The teachers cannot avoid taking the responsibility for that. Considering that, it is very probable that Ichinose was assigned to (Rabbit) group without being told anything in particular. She possesses sharp insight and observation abilities after all. Sooner or later she will begin to suspect something is up. About 'why' should was assigned to (Rabbit) group in particular. It would be fine if she writes it off as a coincidence. But Hoshinomiya-sensei is bad at hiding her emotions so she would inevitably find out that she was sent to scout out Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

If that happens, I need to consider a counterattack. And just by thinking on it, I have already begun solidfying my defenses. "So what are the two of you talking about this late at night? Isn't this by itself a big problem?". "Big problem? As a teacher, isn't it obvious for me to respond to my student's anxieties and consult them on it" Chabashira-sensei replies to Hoshinomiya-sensei. "But if that's true, couldn't you do it in a more open place? There's no need to be sneaky with him".

As Hoshinomiya-sensei tries to figure her out, Chabashira-sensei maintains her sense of rationality and calm. "It's what Ayanokouji himself requested. He wanted to consult me in private without anyone knowing" she finally replies.

"Hmmm...well it's not like I have any complaints towards this". "I see, if you understand then go back to the bar. I'll join you shortly". "Ok, ok! Take your time, but remember not to do anything sexual" Hoshinomiya-sensei tells Chabashira-sensei. And leaving behind such an unnecessary warning, Hoshinomiya-sensei went back into the ship. It seems she's capable of concealing her presence very easily. "Sorry. For being troublesome teachers". "No such thing". Chabashira-sensei did not say

anything about me being scouted out. I don't know what's going on between the two of them, but honestly this has nothing to do with me.

"Anyways, continuing where we left off. The biggest thing bought with points in the past". When I nodded slightly, Chabashira-sensei looked thoughtfully at me. "If I have to say, it would be 'to change the rules of the school'. Of course you can only change it realistically. For instance, you could change the regulations to allow you to arrive at school a minute later than usual and such". Chabashira-sensei chose to use an example to explain rather than a fact. "So only an example?". "Dissatisfied?". "No, it's ok. With this I can more or less understand the school system and the uses of points better". That means depending on how you use your points, even if it's for a trivial reason, one can challenge the school system itself. It seems private points are an extremely vital asset. "You could've asked that through mail. You didn't need to call me out for that" Chabashira-sensei says.

"Because sending a mail to you leaves a record. I'd like to avoid that" I tell her. And I decided to leave it at that and headed for an exit other than the one Hoshinomiya-sensei just used. While there are quite a lot of things I would like to confirm with her, I suppose this is enough for now. "I will be asking you for a favor soon" I tell her. And when I turned to leave, Chabashira-sensei for a moment, looked at me uncertainly.

Midnight. Or more precisely, two hours past midnight. It seems my roommate has woken up quietly. Taking care not to wake the other three sleeping in the room, he slowly got off the bed. Since students were required by the school's rules to sleep in their jerseys, they can also leave their rooms while wearing it. Having confirmed that he was not simply going to the toilet, I also grabbed my room's card key and got off

the bed myself. There's no guarantee that he'll make his move today, but it seems the results of my work are finally showing themselves.

Once he realized I was also awake, he quickly turned to look at me. Our eyes met. And without looking away from his eyes, I told him there's something I needed to talk to him about. He replied that he would be waiting in the corridor. Then he left the room, and out in the corridor he was waiting for me with a slightly troubled expression. It was Hirata who was waiting for me with that troubled expression. "Did I wake you or were you already awake, which one is it?" he asks me.

"The latter. I thought you'd leave the room tonight" I replied. "Why did you think that? Tonight's the first night I actually left the room at night". I assessed the situation and decided beating around the bush would get us nowhere and asked him honestly. "Isn't it just that Karuizawa contacted you tonight?" I asked him. And with that one word he seemed to understand everything. As expected of Hirata, indeed his ability to comprehend situations is unparalleled. "Do you know something?" he asks. "I'm in the same group as Karuizawa after all. I don't know to what extent, but more or less I understand the situation" I told him.

Hirata seemed to be waiting for me to say more. And indeed, with that explanation I gave just now, it still wouldn't be enough of a reason for me to follow him out into the night. "You once told me you wanted me to act as the bridge between you and Horikita, right?" I asked him. "I see, so you're here because Horikita-san ordered you to, is that it?" he asks in response. This saves me the trouble of having to explain more to him so it is most convenient for me.

"Yes. She ordered me to report everything from (Rabbit) group to her, including Karuizawa's situation. So once I heard about Karuizawa's situation and reported back to her, she ordered me to watch you as well.

Of course she ordered me to eavesdrop on you, but since you told me to be the bridge between you and her, I thought I'd rather not sneak up on you. This is a chance for me to hear it from you as well" I told Hirata. "What information does she want?" he asks me. "Everything that Hirata knows about Karuizawa, and the contents of your talk with her" I told him.

It seems Hirata, who does not yet know the circumstances of the (Rabbit) group is confused as to why she would need information on Karuizawa in particular on top of information on the group itself. But at the very least he understands that this information is likely to affect what happens in the future. "I'm not sure how much I can tell you, I still need to consider Karuizawa-san's feelings" Hirata tells me. And with that, Hirata started walking down the corridor. In this calm scenario, I also don't feel like forcing him to talk so I also walked after him with a calm pace free of worry. Even though I'd laid in bed for around two hours, my hair is still in perfect condition. I don't care for it much myself, but to make sure people don't feel uncomfortable when looking at me, I need to consider my hair.

"I'm sure Ayanokouji-kun won't say anything unnecessary, but what I'm about to tell you is extremely sensitive information. And there's the possibility Karuizawa-san will simply refuse to talk and go back. I'd just like you to keep those facts in mind" Hirata tells me. There's always the option of me simply eavesdropping on them while concealing myself, but there's no way Hirata would allow something like that. Since this is something Karuizawa does not want anybody else to hear, he would never allow me to eavesdrop like that. So in this scenario, the best I could do is nod in answer.

The meeting place was in front of a vending machine located in a rest area on the second floor. It was in the middle of a long corridor on the ship. A place easy to notice, yet also easy for someone to notice if there are people eavesdropping on them. The location makes it extremely

difficult to hide oneself and listen in. Karuizawa was already there, in a jersey, sitting on a sofa while waiting for Hirata. At first when she saw him she smiled for a moment, but when she saw me behind Hirata she quickly lost the smile and it was replaced with an angry expression. "Why is Ayanokouji-kun together with Hirata-kun?" she asks. "It's ok I called him and we came together" Hirata answers her.

"Hirata-kun did?...why? I told you I wanted to talk to you alone" she asked him. "I know, but I was worried about what Karuizawa-san told me on the phone. So I brought along Ayanokouji-kun, who seems to understand the situation. Sorry for acting alone like this" Hirata apologized to her. Even though Karuizawa looked extremely dissatisfied with the situation, it doesn't seem like she would just snap like that at Hirata. "But...I still want to talk to you alone..." Karuizawa tells Hirata. "If need be, but you never told me we'd be talking alone on the phone though" Hirata replied to her.

I could more or less already infer that this is related to the trouble with Class C led by Manabe. But I wonder how Karuizawa would approach this topic. If she just wanted to cheer herself up by talking with Hirata, there was no need to insist being alone with him. That means she wishes to talk about a subject she cannot afford an outsider to hear. In any case, remaining silent like this would be pointless. And so Hirata began talking about the contents of their call. "You were telling me about the quarrel you had with Manabe-san and her friends from Class C. Is that true?" he asks her.

In response to that question Karuizawa opened her mouth slightly to answer but perhaps she's still wary of my presence, no answer came forth. It was once again Hirata that broke the silence. "Does Ayanokouji-kun already know about your quarrel with Manabe-san and the others?". "Somewhat". Since the conversation with her does not seem to be going

well, Hirata seemingly is intending on asking me instead. Karuizawa still seemed to be discontent with the situation, but obediently remained silent and listened to our conversation. That might be because I was the one who saw Karuizawa being bullied by Manabe back then.

"From what Karuizawa-san's told me, it seems they accused her first. And then dragged her off to an isolated place and were on the verge of attacking her violently" Hirata tells me. "Yes. That's true. I witnessed it myself. Also Yukimura also witnessed it" I replied to him. "I see..." Hirata said while looking at me thoughtfully. Then he closed his eyes. In this case, I wonder what Hirata's judgment would be? Call Manabe and the others and reprimand them? Or report it to the school? "If Manabe-san and the others indeed used violence, then we definitely need to do something about it. I cannot allow friends to use violence against each other" Hirata declared.

Hearing to those words overflowing with a heroic sense of justice, I saw Karuizawa smile at Hirata for a moment. But once she realized I was looking at her, she immediately reverted back to her angry expression. "Karuizawa-san, you were bullied to the point of not being able to fight back right?" he asks her. "No....". Unable to even answer properly, Karuizawa simply stared silently. But since she did not deny it, it seems to be the truth after all.

It seems Karuizawa had a bit of trouble with a girl named Rika in the past. Manabe and the others tried to make her apologize for it. But in the end, things almost escalated to violence with Karuizawa. Having heard the story, Hirata nodded. "I see, that's why you told me something like that" he said at last. "Something like that?" I asked. "Karuizawa-san told me to stand up for her and get back at Manabe-san and the others" Hirata tells me. This is a lot more straightforward talk than I expected.

But from the perspective of the one that received the bullying, a kill-or-be-killed mindset might be taken I suppose. And indeed, when Hirata spoke those words, Karuizawa who had been silent up until now, spoke.

"Why are you telling him all this...?" she asks Hirata. "Because this isn't the usual Karuizawa-san. You're not the type to try and fight violence with violence, Karuizawa-san" Hirata replies to her. "But she's being bullied right? If you really are her boyfriend, then you have an obligation to save her" I tell Hirata. "Yes, I know that's the case. But I don't believe in that eye-for-an-eye talk. You know don't you?" Hirata replies to me.

The side of these two I don't yet know of, I felt different convictions intermingling there. "Let's think about it together then, how to get along with Manabe-san and her group!" Hirata declares. "That's impossible. I was onesidedly attacked by them. Please understand..." Karuizawa pleads with Hirata. "Onesided? Wasn't it because you bullied Morofuji-san first, Karuizawa-san?" Hirata asks Karuizawa accusingly. By Morofuji, I'm sure Hirata meant the girl named Rika. He's also done his research on them I suppose, it's amazing in a way.

"But that's...I had no other choice...Shinohara-san and the others were watching me" Karuizawa said. "So basically because Shinohara was there, you had no other choice, is that what you mean?" I asked. "You shut your mouth!". Once I voiced my question, Karuizawa immediately shouted at me to keep quiet. The shout echoed down through the corridor.

"I beg you, please save me...Hirata-kun you'll protect me right?" Karuizawa begged Hirata. "Of course I intend to protect you, but I won't do anything to Manabe-san and the others as well. I'll try and find a way for you to talk with each other and get along together" Hirata told her. "I'm telling you that's impossible! If things were that easy I wouldn't even ask

you to help me in the first place" Karuizawa said. It seems a bit extreme, but I can understand Karuizawa's feelings. The position she's in right now is far more dangerous than expected. I wouldn't be surprised if this escalated into a serious incidence of violence. The school has certain rules. Smoking for underaged students is one example, and of course, that is a rule that is present in any high school throughout the country. However, there are still students who manage to sneak in a smoke or two in secret.

In other words, there are things that rules cannot prevent all the time. Bullying is one of them. Hirata seemed to be worried about Karuizawa, but at the same time, he was also worried about Manabe. It seems Hirata is intent on resolving this by pacifying both sides peacefully.

In other words, Hirata did not seem to be thinking of her as a lover but just as another normal friend. "It doesn't matter what the reason is, I cannot do what you expect me to do. For me, Karuizawa-san is indeed a precious classmate. If there's something troubling you I'll protect you. But whatever the reason, I won't hurt someone else either. Even if it's a student of Class C" Hirata declared.

"You liar! You told me you'd protect me!" Karuizawa shouted at Hirata. "Liar? I told you from the start I would take this stance" Hirata replied to her. Hirata said those things that Class D students would find hard to believe suddenly. "I told you from the start, didn't I? That we are not boyfriend and girlfriend. Not for real. I don't mind pretending to date you, but I won't help you like this and you won't be able to depend on me" Hirata declared to her. It seems the relationship nobody doubted at all between these two, was actually faked all along.

"...why are you telling me this now?" Karuizawa asked. Surely this is a complaint against that declaration I heard just now. And now I understand

what Hirata's goal is, he used Karuizawa just now to reveal information as a tribute to Horikita. Something like that.

"I thought to save you, a new approach was required" Hirata said. It's not like he's completely abandoned Karuizawa, he is really trying to save her in his own way. He then approached Karuizawa, who seemed to have lost her composure, but he did not attempt to touch her fragile and delicate shoulder of hers. "Are you saying...I need to use violence myself?" Karuizawa asked.

"I didn't say that. I will do my best to save you. In the morning, I intend to have a chat with Manabe-san and the others. To ask her to stop bothering Karuizawa-san. You might not like it, but I intend to tell them you wanted to apologize to them" Hirata said. "That's not what I want!" Karuizawa replied. Indeed, it seemed Karuizawa was asking Hirata to retaliate against Manabe and the others for bullying her. Taking that into consideration, this seems to be Karuizawa's real essence. Her real personality. More than anything, it seems Karuizawa has something she fears the most.

"I see. If that's the case then there's nothing I can do for you. Sorry about that" Hirata coolly told her that. Even in a situation like this, he is capable of keeping his cool. But even while maintaining his cool, Hirata gave Karuizawa, who could not do anything but depend on him, the death sentence. "Ayanokouji-kun, if you have any ideas please tell us" Hirata then asked me. He seemed to be trying to push this role onto me.

"No need! If you're not going to listen to my request, then I don't need someone like you!" Karuizawa shouted that while kicking a can of juice from the vending machine down the corridor. The juice inside was scattered all over the floor and the sound of the can resounded through the corridor. "Our relationship ends here today. It's over!" Karuizawa

declared that towards Hirata. Rather than the truth of their relationship being revealed, Hirata seemed annoyed at himself for being unable to help her. Despite Karuizawa running away, Hirata did not show any signs of chasing after her. That means he's already decided she's not the one he needs to care about right now.

"Ayanokouji-kun, there are certain things that I cannot do. That is why you're here right now, I'd like you to understand that" Hirata tells me. I was trying to extract information about Karuizawa using Hirata, but it seems Hirata used the opportunity to thrust the role of saving Karuizawa from her troubles onto me instead. "You seem to want to be more than a bridge that connects everyone, that's quite selfish of you. You're everyone's ally right?" I asked Hirata. "Yes. I'm on Karuizawa-san's side and I'm also on Ayanokouji-kun's side. But depending on who I'm talking to, I also end up changing my attitude. You're far more capable than what everyone else think" Hirata told me.

"You're praising me too much" I replied. "Really, I'm quite confident in reading the feelings of other people. That's why I can tell" Hirata continues. I'd like to inquire further about that confidence of his, but I suppose talking about the solution to the problem comes first. "Firstly, I'd once again like to ask about your relationship with Karuizawa. It looks like your relationship with her is just a front, and not real" I asked him. "That turn of phrase, it seems Ayanokouji-kun already suspected this?" he asks me.

"It's been almost four months since you started going out with Karuizawa. But I haven't seen any signs of your relationship having progressed since then. Of course, you could consider the option that you are maintaining a pure and platonic relationship with her. But you've always been keeping your distance from her, and you're still calling each other by your last names" I said.

Even if their physical relationship has not progressed, if they had grown closer emotionally, naturally they would have changed their way of calling each other as well. But for better or for worse, Hirata and Karuizawa's relationship had shown no such signs of progress. In a relationship between a man and a woman, not showing any signs of progress or change is the strange thing. "That's right. We weren't really dating. We only went out with each other because we felt it was necessary. Do you understand the contradiction here?" Hirata asks me.

Despite not really dating each other, it was still necessary to do so. That means their objectives had aligned. And that would mean there is merit from going out with each other? Then who is the one requesting this and who is the one acquiescing to that request? That's obvious. Karuizawa was the one who asked Hirata to fake their relationship and Hirata simply answered her request. Knowing that, her actions that can be explained by this fact had increased.

"The rumors started roughly three weeks after the start of semester, and from that point onwards Karuizawa's popularity soared". This phenomenon can be observed in our group as well. By attaching herself to Machida, Karuizawa was able to assert herself more aggressively than before and her influence in the group also grew proportionately. In other words, that was how Karuizawa became the mistletoe for Hirata.

"So you pretended to be Karuizawa's boyfriend to help raise her status" I asked for the truth and Hirata simply smiled at me. I thought this is the full truth---for a moment but I realized the pieces did not fit in yet. Perhaps she used Hirata and Machida to stand at the top of the caste system of the school? No, that alone still doesn't explain the situation. If she wanted to dominate the class all she needed was to ask Hirata to go out with her and Hirata would probably agree. Her request was now was too tall an

order. Karuizawa's daily attitude is a very strong one, and she sometimes plays the part of the aggressor in a bullying situation too. But why accept that without questioning her?

And...did Karuizawa really use Hirata and the others to increase her status in the class. That's also a questionable matter. In this case, you can't say that she used Machida only to increase her influence in the group. If anything, she showed no interest in the group's proceedings and remained silent most of the time. If so, there was no need to use Machida from the start.

So what exactly---was the trigger that caused her to approach Machida?

Now I finally feel like I understand the girl named Karuizawa Kei. 'To protect herself' huh?. By process of elimination the only answer that's left is the truth. There's no mistaking it. "You understand now don't you? To be honest when I heard this answer from you, I had goosebumps" Hirata said. "I just heard it from Horikita that's all, that Karuizawa has her own reasons for using Hirata and the others" I replied.

I tried to deceive him that way, but Hirata's not such a simple man that he would fall for something like this. "Ayanokouji-kun if I had to tell you honestly...it might sound rude but I find you creepy. Like an ominous existence. If I've offended you I apologize" Hirata tells me. "Ominous? Why do you think that?" I asked. "I've been looking at you ever since the school year started. But Ayanokouji-kun then and the Ayanokouji-kun now are like different people. The presence you emit, and the words you use. Almost like you're a different person than usual" Hirata tells me.

Hirata has the ability to discern the actions and behaviours of the people around him and never overlook that. It couldn't be helped that he would notice the difference in me. "I already told you right? It's only thanks to Horikita's advice. I told Horikita everything about my group. And I just obey the orders she gives me that's all. The incident on the island test was the same too. Horikita made the right judgments and guided Class D to victory. And the class gained a lot of points as a direct result. In other words there's a merit in doing this for me too. She's terribly bad at communication as you know, so I just relay what you said to her and receive orders from her" I told Hirata.

I spend a lot of time with Horikita, and Hirata who knows me this well surely won't doubt those words I said. "If it's Horikita-san, she must have surely judged that saving Karuizawa-san would lead to the class gaining an advantage" he said. "Yes". "But I do think you're still amazing, Ayanokouji-kun. You're different from Ike-kun or Yamauchi-kun" Hirata admits to me. "I'm inferior to the both of them" I replied. "Even if you're only following Horikita-san's orders, it's still you who's talking to me right now. It's not like the conversation will include only the details of her order. To adapt to the flow of the conversation takes clear logic. It's not something you can simply think up overnight" Hirata said in response.

".....". It seems Hirata's better than I expected. Despite his desire to save her too, he is still able to maintain his normal high abilities. "It's something you said but, the reason I accepted Karuizawa-san's request to be her boyfriend was to help her 'protect herself'. That's what she requested. That she wants me to save her. It might be hard for you to believe but, throughout her elementary and middle school years, for 9 whole years. She received a horrifying amount of bullying" Hirata tells me.

"I don't doubt you, but this story is real isn't it?" I asked to confirm.

It seems Karuizawa's hyperventilation earlier in the day was triggered by her past. Since I myself saw it, I cannot help but believe the trauma of her past.

"Of course I only met Karuizawa-san after she entered this school, but I do understand. I know the look and smell and presence of a person who's been a victim of bullying. That's why I agreed to go out with her. By using her position as my girlfriend, Karuizawa-san would be able to escape her past of being bullied. I think right now, the attitude she has isn't the real Karuizawa-san. She's desperately trying to act tough isn't she?" Hirata said to me.

I think normally, she's not able to control her feelings that well. Victims of bullying have personalities like a sakura flower usually. Plain, obedient and weak. Also on the flip side, people with a strong personality like Karuizawa are also prone to being bullied. But in short, Karuizawa's current personality is a fake. That's why she needs someone like Hirata or Machida at her back. Someone who can rule the field for her. In doing so, she was able to regain her influence that way. "I can understand that now more or less, but wait, what are the benefits of doing this for you?" I asked Hirata.

This may be a common saying, but love is a part of youth for students. Hirata is very popular amongst the girls. Then by pretending to date Karuizawa, he would be giving up on real love. "Benefit? That would be Karuizawa-san living her high school life without being bullied. That's all" Hirata replied to me. He just said that. It's not hypocrisy nor love, and not for himself as well. "Won't you believe me? If that's my only reason" he asks. "It's not that I distrust you, but there's a deeper meaning behind that isn't there?" I asked him in return.

Hirata will not hesitate if it's to save a friend, but he also recognizes Manabe and the others as friends. The way he cares about others can almost be described as a disease.

Since he's told me this much about it, no doubt Hirata also feels it necessary to tell me about this. He buys some canned drinks from the vending machine and tosses me one. I gratefully accepted it. "Until my second year of middle school, if I have to honestly say I was an average guy who didn't stand out much" he tells me. "Hirata was...I can't really imagine that" I replied. The image was too different from the man who always showed excellent leadership.

"I didn't stand out too much, but I also wasn't invisible. My friend was also like that. I was really normal. I had a friend I got along with really well ever since I was a kid named Sugimura-kun. A boy. For six years in elementary school we were together in the same class. And because we were neighbors as well we always went to and back from school together" Hirata said with a voice filled with nostalgia. And so Hirata recalls his past.

"When we entered middle school, for the first time, we were separated into different classes. But even so, at first we still went to school and back home together. But the days we did that started declining gradually and I began playing with boys from my new class. It's a normal story you could've heard anywhere" he continued. It's normal that in a new environment, one would inevitably make new friends. There was nothing unusual in that itself.

"But you see...even though I was busy playing with my friends. In the back, Sugimura-kun was actually being bullied" Hirata continued to say while strongly gripping his can of juice. Even an outsider would know what's happening.

"Sugimura-kun sent me an SOS many, many times. Many times he showed up with his face injured and injury marks all over him. But I instead prioritized playing with my new friends and never took him seriously. Sugimura-kun, who originally had a headstrong personality, always was quick to pick a fight so I never deeply thought about his situation. But when we both became 2nd year students, we reunited with each other. And by that time, Sugimura-kun's had become heartbroken. His bright, cheerful image was no longer there and marks left by punches and kicks only remained. He was not even allowed to go to the toilet and forced to leak in the middle of class. That sort of thing became routine..." Hirata tells me.

"So you saw it and..."

"Yeah. I think you understand too. But I didn't do anything. I couldn't do anything. I was too afraid that I would become the new target. I was afraid that my enjoyable life then would be destroyed...and towards Sugimura-kun who'd always been together with me, I continued to pretend to not see him. I believed that one day the bullies would get bored of him. That one day Sugimura-kun will stop coming to school and the bullying would stop. Or that somebody else would step in and save him. I just kept on thinking self-serving things like that" he continued.

"And that Sugimura person...what happened to him in the end?" I asked Hirata.

"Even now the memory of that day is burned into my head. After morning soccer practice, I returned to my classroom. And there, I saw Sugimura-kun and decided to wait until going in. Honestly, at the time, I felt uncomfortable. Even though he was a friend I played together with

since I was a child, at the time he almost felt like a stranger to me. I could not help but think cruel thoughts like I would be bullied along with him. Perhaps Sugimura-kun also saw my ugly heart, but he didn't say anything. But almost like a plea for help...that day in the middle of class, he jumped out the window" Hirata tells me.

"Jumped out? Is he dead?" I asked.

"It seems he was declared brain dead. But even now, his parents are still waiting for Sugimura-kun's recovery and believe in it. But whether he's still alive or dead now, I don't know. The events of that day were still so surreal, I still wonder if it was merely a dream or a hallucination. It was that unbelievable. Because the moment Sugimura-kun jumped, I became acutely aware. By treasuring myself, I pushed my precious friend to his death" he said. And so that was the birth of the man named Hirata Yousuke.

"I don't think this will result in Sugimura-kun's salvation, but, at the very least, I want to repent. And to do that, I thought the only way was to save someone else like him" Hirata continued.

"It's not like I don't know how you feel but, the world isn't that simple is it? Even right now, someone somewhere is getting bullied. And like that Sugimura you talked about, they're trying to take their own lives. You cannot stop those people can you?" I told Hirata. "Of course I understand that. I'm not a hero of justice. But, I'd like to save the people in front of me. I have to save them. That is the responsibility of the me who bears the sin" Hirata said.

"Then how will you decide on this case? You want to save both Karuizawa and Manabe. But that is an impossible task" I told him. "I know

it's a contradictory task, that's why you're here right now" he said. I see, it seems he himself notices his own abnormality. In any case, it seems he cannot help but want to save people he knows. "I never expected the day would come that I'd tell this story to someone else. Nobody knows about this, that is part of why I chose this school" he continued. Then after finishing the juice, he threw it into the trashbin. "Can I entrust this to Horikita-san?" he asks at last.

"If you can promise not to talk halfway, I'm sure Horikita will do something about this" I replied to him. "Then I will choose to believe in the two of you. Because that is also my ideal" Hirata told me.

It seems for now Hirata won't be participating in the matter of Karuizawa. And most likely from now on, whenever Hirata is in trouble, he'll probably rely on me. But that would also mean I have succeeded in securing Hirata's cooperation. That would be a major power I've gained on my side. It's natural that he got his own reward too.

"Hirata. Since you have a large social network I'd like to ask you for a favour. Can you hear me out?" I asked. And with that said, I handed Hirata a piece of paper. And after reading it, Hirata accepted my request without so much as making an unpleasant face.

"And also Ayanokouji-kun. Ever since the exam began, there is still one thing I've been hiding from you. I know who's the last "target" amongst the Class D students..." he said.

On the day of the exam's interval, I chose to take a certain course of action but I was unexpectedly called by Sakura and so I instead decided

to hear her out.

"It seems the (Cow) group's exam ended" I said.

"Yeah..."

I checked the mail on my phone that was sent to Sakura too along with all the other students by the school side. It simply said

"The test for the (Cow) group has ended. Members of the (Cow) group are no longer required to participate in the exam. Please make sure to not disturb the other students".

It was the same sort of text sent after the (Monkey) group's exam ended. Sakura looked at me with uneasy eyes. "Have I...done something wrong?" she asks.

"No that's not it. It just means that someone in the (Cow) group reported the "target" to the school" I told her. Leaving aside the case that occurred thanks to Kouenji's rampage, perhaps betrayal is becoming more prevalent in this exam.

Either it was 'betrayal with certainty' or 'betrayal from being in a rush'.

"By the way, Sakura, were you the "target" of your group or was it someone else?" I asked her. When I asked her, Sakura shook her head from side to side to deny it. "N-no. I'm not the "target". But, I'm not sure about Sudo-kun and the others..." she replied.

For Sakura, who'd been a part of the (Cow) group for only two days, it seems like she has no idea what to make of the situation.

"Don't overthink it, even I still don't know's the "target" of my group after all" I said to her.

"Yeah...thank you Ayanokouji-kun. I'm happy you told me that".

"How was the situation with Class A? From the rumors it seems like they didn't participate in the discussions" I asked her.

"That's...yeah. Just like the others have been saying. They didn't talk at all" she replied to me.

It seems Katsuragi's been thoroughly carrying out his strategy in all the groups. That would mean the party that caused this event would have to be Class C. But in that case a question would arise. Ryuen had foregone the rules set by the school. But since the school does not actively announce the details of the exam it is impossible to ascertain whether I'm correct or not at the moment. That is precisely why it's difficult to figure out rule behind this exam.

If I misread it, I would just end up self-destructing and receiving massive damage that way.

Other than the (Cow) group, the fact that the other groups have not yet ended their exams must mean that even Ryuen has not figured out the answer yet too.

After the end of a mysterious exam like this, no doubt many students are also feeling lost.

"If there's anything else, feel free to consult me anytime" I told Sakura.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. See you"

Having bid farewell to Sakura who left while swinging her little hands cutely from side to side, I now headed down towards the basement. Then I descended into the lower levels of the ship where people don't usually go. Although the area was prohibited for students, it was still unlocked to allow the crew access to it. The area where the switchboard room is located, although easy to access, is not a popular spot for people to be in at all.

Although if one shouts with a loud voice, echoes will form, since this place is practically automated no one will normally come to such a place.

There are only two entrances and exits to this place including the regular one. The other one is a door that leads to the emergency staircase and even the crew usually do not use it. From the dust that had accumulated on that door I could tell that much. That means I can monitor the situation just by keeping an eye on the one access that's normally used.

Furthermore, more conveniently for me it seems that phones do not have reception down here. Occasionally there is sometimes reception down here but most of the time it is extremely difficult to send a mail or chat from down here much less make a call. "All the pieces are in place" I murmured.

All that's left is to execute the plan step by step so I won't make a mistake.

First I'll have to contact Hirata, then have him call Karuizawa to this place. To make sure there's enough time for everything, I'd have to call Karuizawa here at least an hour early. For that I ascended back up to the upper floors to make the call.

I'm sure she'll be cautious after the events of last night's conversation, but if Hirata calls her out again to speak alone with her Karuizawa will surely respond to that. She did say she would break up with Hirata, but if she really does break up with him, she's the only one who will suffer from that. As long as Manabe and her group are targeting her, for Karuizawa, the existence of Hirata is necessary for her to continue her life in school.

"I've already asked Karuizawa-san to be there at 4PM. I'll send you Manabe-san's address to you now". I received such a mail from Hirata. As expected, he's listened to my request excellently and has succeeded in calling her out here. As a bonus, Hirata even knew the contact address of Manabe from another class. If he didn't, I would have had to run the risk of asking Kushida so it saves me the trouble.

"But I cannot help you any more than this. Don't make Karuizawa-san sad please" Hirata added that as a postscript in the mail.

So he doesn't want her to be sad, huh? If he knew what I'm really about to do to Karuizawa, I'm sure Hirata would be furious with me. But as long as I don't run into a problem now that's fine. As such, even if she breaks here now, as long as he doesn't notice after the event there would be no problem. To use an extreme example even if you commit murder, as long as there's insufficient evidence, you're a free man.

I then quickly skip through the text I wrote earlier and sent it. The contents were "Hey, do you have a moment?". A brief sentence just like that.

As a general rule, the chat application I'm using only allows one account per phone. But there is a slight loophole in that rule, by creating a new major SNS account you can create another account for yourself. Of course, normally there are no students who divide themselves between a main and a sub account. Because there's not much merit in switching between these accounts. But by doing so, I can contact a third party without having my own identity be revealed as well.

I have to proceed delicately from here on. As long as I don't make a mistake in the process it should go perfectly.

Despite the message having come from an anonymous sender, Manabe quickly replied to it. "Who are you?". Manabe, naturally not knowing the sender, replied with that question. "Is there anyone around you right now?" I replied. "No. I'm alone...who are you?" she asked again.

"Don't show this chat to anyone. This is for your sake" I told her. "Like I said, who are you?" she asked.

"I'm the same as you. We hate the same person. Let's just leave it at that" I told Manabe. Although the 'read' sign appeared immediately, Manabe took her time to reply. Perhaps she still doesn't understand the implication of that sentence. "Have you mistaken me for someone?" she finally replies. "I'm not making a mistake, Manabe-san. I'm contacting you to inform you about the Karuizawa-san you hate so much. I thought I could consult you on the situation, Manabe-san" I mailed that to her.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Please stop sending me messages" she quickly replied. It seems she's on guard, not knowing whether I'm an enemy or not. A natural reaction. I need to resolve this misunderstanding firstly.

"The truth is, as her fellow classmate, I've been harboring a grudge against Karuizawa-san for a while now. That's why I thought we could cooperate and have our revenge on her. Since I'm her classmate it's hard for me to exact my vengeance on Karuizawa-san directly, but that's why I would like to cooperate with you" I said to Manabe.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to ignore you then" she replied.

Even though she was wary of me, the fact that she still hasn't cut off contact with me is a testament to how much she hates Karuizawa it seems. It surely stems from her desire to avenge her friend Rika and her

own hate towards Karuizawa. I could easily deduce that from the fact that Manabe used force to bring Karuizawa into the emergency staircase.

"Rika-chan is still scared of Karuizawa-san. Don't you want to help her as a friend? Your face has revenge written all over it you know? But the truth is, you can't do it even if you want to. Since after yesterday's events, Karuizawa-san is on her guard. I'm sure she won't leave Hirata-kun or Machida-kun's side for a while. And she'll always be together with her female friends so she won't be alone either" I told Manabe.

"I don't need your help. I just need to bring Rika into contact with Karuizawa-san. The truth will be out then" she said.

"I wonder if it'll be that easy. I don't think she would easily admit to her wrongdoing. On the contrary, it would just trouble Rika-chan. If Karuizawa-san uses heartless words she'll only just end up wounding Rika-chan further. No, that's not all. If she harbors a grudge, she might even bully Rika-chan further" I replied to Manabe.

"...then what should I do? Are you saying there's a way?" she asks. Manabe's desire to settle this with the next confrontation becomes clear. "There is. You and me. We can cooperate to make sure we can exact our revenge on her in a secure location" I told her. "And the guarantee? It looks like you're just planning on selling me out to the school. This smells like a sub account anyways" Manabe replied to me.

"If I am indeed selling you out, please feel free to show this chat log to the teachers, Manabe-san. This account has been registered with the school's phone. In other words, I'm risking my identity to take revenge on Karuizawa-san. That way, I'm the one bearing the most responsibility. Isn't that right?" I told her.

I'm sure Manabe also understands this well. Even if this is a sub account, once you analyze it thoroughly, the identity of the person behind it can be revealed. If it comes to that, I, as the one who masterminded this plan for revenge, would bear the most responsibility and undoubtedly be punished harshly. "Then if I show this chat to the school now what would you do, it's over for you" Manabe asks me.

"Because I believe Manabe-san is not the type of person to do that. I must trust in order to be trusted after all" I told her. "I understand what you're trying to say, more or less. I'll hear you out at least" she finally said.

After that I repeat a similar story to her multiple times over. About how much I hated Karuizawa. About how I wanted revenge on her yet couldn't as someone in a weaker position. And about how I overheard how Manabe and her friends were quarreling with Karuizawa. I thoroughly made sure to play the victim.

"Once we return to land, contact with Karuizawa would surely become difficult. Since the school dorms are littered with surveillance cameras, even if you tried to bring her into a private area, there would be eyes watching you. This place, a battlefield with no escape, would be the perfect place for you." I told Manabe. This would make sure Manabe and the others realize this place, only on this ship, can they get their revenge. "So...what are you proposing you can do?" she finally asks me.

Manabe, who seems to have finally caught up with my plan, finally starts asking questions.

"I can call Karuizawa-san. After that, you can take your time talking with her and settling the problem" I told Manabe.

And with that, through the chat, I sent her a map of the lower levels of the ship.

"Since phones don't get reception down there. She can't call for help either. And no one normally goes down there anyways" I said. "I see...so you can call Karuizawa-san down there as a classmate?" Manabe asks. "I would like you to decide now whether to cooperate with my plan or not. After I call her, you can decide whether or not you'd like to have your revenge. There would be no problems that way, no?" I asked her.

After that, for the longest time, despite the 'read' sign having appeared. No reply came from Manabe. Then. Once the reply came, I became sure I would succeed. IF my plan to convince her via chat failed, I had another plan prepared where I would have to appear before Manabe myself via direct contact. Of course that was dangerous. Since I had taken several pictures of her threatening Karuizawa in the emergency staircase, I could have blackmailed her into following my plan. But the risk is also massive, since I would like to avoid my existence standing out.

"Now. Let me see what you can do, Manabe".

6

At times, a deep resounding noise echoes on the dark floor. Perhaps that happens whenever the ship changes course, or perhaps it's because the ship had hit something. But despite that, in a place where only the sound of machines can be heard, the girl came alone. "What is this? I can't get through on the phone" she mutters.

There's still ten minutes left before the promised time. Perhaps she came early so she can calm herself down before meeting Hirata.

After realizing that the phone would be useless, Karuizawa pocketed it again with a bored expression and leaned against the wall.

And with time, what conclusion did she draw from this? But whatever it is, unfortunately, Hirata would never hear it. As the time reached 4PM, the only door that's used on the floor opened with a loud thud. The ones who appeared were the three girl group of Class C. The girls led by Manabe. And one more. A girl whose aura resembled Sakura's. Probably the girl called Rika.

It's all right. Manabe called out as she set foot into the room. And soon, she found the figure of Karuizawa. Naturally, Karuizawa had also noticed them. "W-w-why are you here?" Karuizawa trembled at the unexpected appearance of these people. But in a narrow space with only no escape route, escaping is also difficult. "I just saw you entering this place. Yeah, this is a good time so I want to introduce you. This girl is Rika. Karuizawa-san, do you remember her?" Manabe asks.

She then pulls Rika, who was hiding behind her, to the front. And had the two of them come face-to-face. Karuizawa averted her gaze and pretended not to know, but from her behaviour, it's obvious she does remember her. "Hey Rika, the one who pushed you before. It's Karuizawa-san, right?" Manabe asks Rika. "Yes...it's this person" she replied. Having heard the answer, Manabe smiled a happy smile from the bottom of her heart. On the other hand, Karuizawa, having realized the danger of the situation, became anxious and confused. All I need to do now is to watch the miserable events that would soon unfold here.

Even if Karuizawa encounters a more severe torment than expected here, I have absolutely no intention of saving her halfway here.

"Apologize to Rika".

"Huh? Who would apologize? I've done nothing wrong" Karuizawa retorted.

"To act tough even in this situation, that's pretty impressive. But I think I more or less understand" Manabe replied to her.

".....what do you understand?".

"That odd and terrified attitude. Karuizawa-san, you were a victim of bullying weren't you?" Manabe asks her.

"....".

The fact that she was so desperately trying to hide was figured out by a person she did not even know well.

"I'm spot on, aren't I? I knew it, I had that sort of feeling about you. From the start" Manabe continued.

"T-that's not true..."

It was a terrible denial, but even for a good actor, they would not be able to convince her. It's not like Manabe had a good eye for observing such things. But because I had already told Manabe all about it beforehand. That Karuizawa had been bullied horribly since childhood. That she carried a severe trauma from it. It's pointless to deny it to someone who already knows the truth.

"If you kneel and beg now, I might forgive you. That's what you're good at right? Kneeling" Manabe tells Karuizawa.

"I-I w-won't do it. Besides, I've never done it before" Karuizawa replies.

She tried to pass by Manabe as if to escape, but Manabe simply grabbed her long hair and pushed her back towards the wall, slamming her into it.

Having been put at ease by a place for revenge having been prepared for her, controlling Manabe would surely no longer work. What we agreed on in our chat was for her to simply 'meet' with Karuizawa.

She should have been hesitant to use violence as a means for revenge. But upon meeting face-to-face, all the stress she must have been holding up inside her, along with the expectation of her friends around her to get back at Karuizawa, it made sure Manabe would not be satisfied unless she made Karuizawa suffer.

That is precisely what I had been aiming for.

There was an experiment in the 1960s known as the Milgram experiment. Also known as the Eichmann experiment, it involved conducting tests involving a 'teacher' role and a 'student' role in isolated facilities. The 'teacher's' role is to administer a low electric shock to the subject to the point that fear and pain of the shock would be remembered by them. Then, the person assigned the 'student' role would be separated from the 'teacher' via a glass with a device that allows the shock to flow to the 'student' being installed. The switch would then be entrusted to the subject assigned the 'teacher' role. This completes the preparations for the experiment.

Then the experimenter gives the 'student' a series of questions to answer to the 'teacher'. For every time the 'student' answers wrong, the 'teacher' is to continue administering the electric shocks. And with each mistake, to raise the voltage of the shocks as well. Finally, the switch can go up to 450 volts which is powerful enough to be fatal to humans. On the flip side, the weakest was 45 volts and amounted only to a mild itching. However, contrary to the 'teacher's' knowledge, the device was only a fake and the 'students' were made to act out in pain through screaming that would be heard on the other side.

Even if the current flows to the subject there would not be much reaction initially, although each time the voltage is increased, the pain would increase from screaming, to moaning and finally silence. Subjects who were assigned the 'teacher' role were not threatened by this and continued to raise the voltage despite understanding the other party was suffering in pain. Nearly 66% of the subjects raised the voltage to the point where human beings would have been killed. The experiment clearly shows that 'depending on the circumstances, any person is capable of showing cruelty'.

"It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! Let go of me!". Karuizawa screams in pain from having her hair pulled, but Manabe only laughs comfortably. Right now, the closed environment is this lower level of the ship. The 'teacher' role has been assigned to Manabe and the 'student' role to Karuizawa as per the experiment. I've prepared a stage as similar to that of the Milgram experiment as I could. Normally, even with these conditions, it would be insufficient but, given the history between the two of them the results of the experiment should still hold true here.

The suffering and pain of Karuizawa, who had been acting tough only a while ago, would feel very good to them right now.

"Haah".

"Uwa~ Shiho, you're using your knee to kick her too much you know"

Manabe continues to use her knee to attack the area around Karuizawa's stomach. Naturally, Manabe, who's not used to kicking like this, has slow and sluggish movements and her kicks should not hurt that much. But for Manabe, the pain in Karuizawa's voice is the greatest reward.

It seemed she's having the time of her life and whispered to Rika, who had been taking her distance from them until now.

"Come Rika, you should try it too".

"I-I'm fine..."

"We're doing this for you, you know? It's ok, no one's looking anyways".

Rika seemed to be rejecting taking revenge directly, but this closed environment won't let her. 'You're also my friend aren't you?'. If something like that were to be uttered here, it would be difficult for her to continue rejecting it. If that anger were to be directed at her, she would be the victim tomorrow. She can't deny that she might be met with the same eyes from Manabe later.

"Uuunn...I'll try doing it".

Pechi. With a dry and light sound like that, Rika slaps Karuizawa with a slap that would cause no pain.

"L-like this?"

"That won't do. You need to make it stronger, like this".

Pan! A high sound like that resounded as Manabe strikes Karuizawa's cheek like that. In response to that, Karuizawa suffered. And as instructed, Rika slowly repeats her slap.

Slowly, the force of her slaps increased steadily.

"S-s-s-stop..."

"Haha...this is fun...haha".

It seems rather than Manabe. She would have been a more appropriate person for the Milgram experiment. Karuizawa, who had been putting up a strong front until now, began to show pain.

"Please, forgive me already..."

She then begs for forgiveness. Seeing that figure must have been unbearably comfortable and pleasant I suspect.

Almost as if she had never been that afraid in the first place, Rika began to punch and kick strongly. Furthermore, the interesting thing is, places that they had initially not touched, such as beneath her uniform and beneath her hair, places that normally couldn't be seen. They started targeting those places as well.

Karuizawa, who had already collapsed in fear, simply shed tears while hiding her face. And as to not be noticed, I who had been observing the scene, moved without making a sound. Then quietly opened the door to the emergency staircase to not alert Manabe and the others. For a while longer, Manabe's distraction will surely continue. It doesn't matter whatever happens. Once something has been thoroughly destroyed, it saves you trouble while rebuilding it.

I quietly and slowly closed the door behind me as Karuizawa's screams were blocked by the door and soon could no longer be heard.

7

After I made sure Manabe's gang has left, I re-entered the room. Karuizawa probably heard the door opening, but she continued to squat on the floor and cried. Perhaps her overwhelming sense of fear had prevented her from noticing me.

So this is the true face of the egotistic and unyielding class' girls' leader?

Thanks to the suggest I gave to Manabe, Karuizawa's uniform and exposed skins were more or less intact. If her uniform was ripped or someone cut her hair, it would be difficult to fool others. While bullying is

common, this school's uniqueness makes bullying much harder to contain.

If one has to find something to be concerned of, it'd be that her face was a bit reddened due to the physical abuse; By tomorrow it should subside.

"Karuizawa"

I called her name. She lifted her head and finally noticed me.

"Wh, how...?!"

The man she never thought of seeing here, had seen the thing she does not want anyone to see. She started to panic.

But the experience was too traumatic for her to stop crying at once and pretend everything is fine.

I will eventually stop crying. I will eventually calm down. As long as he leaves before that- this small and futile wish of her will not come to pass. I silently waited.

After a while, Karuizawa sobbing gradually turned to quiet sobs.

if you put 2 people alone in this dark and isolated environment, they can't help but mentally feel closer. This works even if the 2 people normally hated each others. This is what humans do.

"Calmed down yet?"

"...More or less..."

Karuizawa used her sleeves to wipe her swollen eyes. She is still paralyzed and couldn't get back up. I reached out my hand to help her up, but she didn't take it.

"Where is Hirata....."

"Even though you two were supposed to meet here, but I believe the teacher called him. I was with him then, so I came in place of him."

This explanation should be sufficient in explaining how everything ended like this.

For now I don't need to let know know the truth. First item on the to do list is to make her let her guard down and fill the cracks in her psychic.

"So, why are you crying?"

"It's Manabe and her gang.....I will not let them get away with this."

Looks like she is remembering what just happened to her. Karuizawa's body started to shook. Even if she doesn't want to show me this humiliating side of her, but the fear that tainted her body is not so easily removed.

"Do not tell anyone that I cried. If you do I will not forgive you."

Karuizawa's weakness is that she cannot report what happened to her to the school. If Manabe and co's physical assault on Karuizawa is known, then the school would want to find out the reason behind it. To protect her social status, she cannot let this happen. Which is why she is now planning to use Hirata to get back at the girls.

"You know, to get back at them, even someone like you can do it. They are just girls after all."

"What an unreasonable request."

"Are you afraid that they will payback? And you claim that you are a man....."

"It is apparent from Sudou's incident that a simple 'payback' is not going to solve anything. An eye for an eye would only escalate the conflict. It would also brings the school in and start an investigation. This is not what you wish, yes?"

"So you are telling to suck it up?"

I know how to answer her, but I choose to remain silent.

"Like, they would, no, for sure they would continue to do all kinds of things to me....."

Karuizawa's body continued to shake. True, there is no guarantee that Manabe would stop at this. There are more escape points once we return to the school campus, but Karuizawa can not continue to play hide and seek for the rest of her time here. At the same time, our classmates would start to notice Karuizawa's changes. As both sides close in, Karuizawa will have nowhere to run to.

Karuizawa realizes this and is now extremely anxious at stopping this. And this anxiety is what I have been aiming for all along.

"It would be a shame if things returned back to how they were before. I can empathize with you on this."

"Ah.....? What did you say? What do you mean?"

Karuizawa is trying to see judge how much I know. I saw that Manabe's gang was bullying her, but I shouldn't know of her past. If I truly don't know, then her past is something that she must hide from me.

"What do I mean? Exactly what the sentence meant. Against all odds you escaped to this isolated ward, and even claimed the throne of the D class leader. But the fact that you are a victim of bullying has not changed."

"Who, who did you say is a victim of bullying!"

"I mean you, Karuizawa!"

I grabbed Karuizawa's wrist and dragged her up.

"Wait, what are you doing!"

I pinned Karuizawa onto the wall and forced her face towards me.

"You were being tormented by Manabe, weren't you? They dragged your hair. They slapped your face. They kicked your breasts, your waist, and your stomach. And that's how you ended up on the ground, miserable, humiliated, pitifully sobbing."

"!?"

Even though she did not want to face to face with me, but she cannot get away.

As if we are getting suck into them, we stared at each other's eyes. There's no romance involved- what we shared here is darkness itself.

"Ever since you were little you were a victim. Grade school middle school the bullying was non-stop. Isn't this why you want to put a stop to it?"

"Did you hear...from Hirata?"

"I don't know if I should tell you this or not. Hirata fancies himself as everyone's trusted companion. He will help you, and he will help others. Even if you did secure your place in D class by pretending to be his girlfriend, he will not be much use to you in situations like this. In other word, as a parasite, he is not a good host."

Karuizawa is much smarter than her appearance. She understands that Hirata's neutral alignment, so initially she didn't do anything stupid in the Usagi group. Too bad for her, to show her social status, she picked a fight with Rika and by extension her gang. This leds to her download.

She couldn't possibly show this weak side of her to the rest of D class girls.

"Why you.....What gives you the right to pretentiously lecture me!"

"My right? You haven't realize it yet? You should know your place. Do you know who is in front of you? It's not Hirata. It's me. I know your checkered past. I know about the fake relationship between you and Hirata. I know that Manabe just physically assailed you and all you could do was haplessly cried. I know all these."

Everything Karuizawa Kei doesn't want others to know. I, an outsider, now knows all of them.



"In other word? If you become too much of a handful, I can at any time release these information."

How terrifying would it be? Karuizawa should know it very well.

"Don't, don't joke around! Who do you think you are!"

"Someone who knows the truth. That's all there is to it. Isn't this all you care about?"

As I closed in on her, Karuizawa turned her face away to avoid looking at me. I grabbed her cheeks and forced her face back towards me. She desperately wants to avoid my gaze, but a man's strength is too strong for her to resist. She closed her eyes in a futile attempt to escape.

"What! What do you want from me! Are you aiming for my body?"

"Your body huh. That might not be a bad idea."

My finger tips slides across Karuizawa's thighs. The softness I feel is almost inhuman. The smoothness of her skins is very different from what I know and what I have.

"No!!"

She desperately tried to get away from me. I strengthened my hold on her cheeks and made her look into my eyes.

"Do not resist. If you do then I will release everything about to the school."

This line, like a curse, had cursed her body into a constrained stiffness.

Anger, horrified, fear, despair. Yes, how much emotion has Karuizawa been carrying?

She should notice that right now I am completely different from the persona I projected in everyday lives.

"Spread your legs."

I ordered. Karuizawa's tears began to dropped as she slowly spread them.

Even if she knows she will be violated here, she will wants to protect the place she has right now.

The pain from her bullying has taken control, and this is the proof.

I placed my hand on my belt and intentionally played with the metal buckle. Even then, Karuizawa did not run away.

She is trying desperately to accept this new reality. She looked at me with hollowed eyes, and muttered to herself.

I stand correct. Karuizawa Kei is a usable tool.

My goal is not her body. I am threatening her to see how far she would go to protect what she has.

It is a risky gamble for me to reveal my true nature. If Karuizawa runs away and reports on me, then our positions would be completely reverse. But this girl can not do it.

She is afraid of her past more than anything else. Afraid that she will lose the place she has. To protect this she is even willing to use her body. That is how much this place means to her.

"I will not bow down to you.....I am not being bullied by you.....You merely got hold of my weakness and used me! You asshole just do whatever you want and violate me!"

Karuizawa howled, as if she is exposing her raw anger to the world.

"But it's fine. This is not the first time I've succumbed to forces..."

She mockingly laughed. Karuizawa turned and looked at me in the eyes.

"Ho ho.....Hey, do you know? When a immutable truth is presented, how do humans react.....?"

She shook and hugged herself. With a hollowed and dulled smile, she gave me a faraway stare.

"I give up. Yes, I was preyed on and devoured. I was reduced to mechanically reacting to stimulus. I couldn't even muster the courage to resist. I couldn't do anything else. All I can do is receive them."

As she finally comes to term with this decision, Karuizawa herself lifted her skirt, and placed her hands on her panties.

I grasped her wrists and hold her against the ship's wall.

"What did you received. Where were the pains that tormented you?"

"What.....Of course everything I had. My shoes were tacks put in. My table drawer was filled with dead animal carcasses. When I go to washrooms I get splashed on with dirty water. My uniforms were written with words like 'prostitute'. My hair was dragged on. Punches and kicks were so numerous they were not worth mentioning. Any kind of bullying that you can imagine, I've experienced it. What I said was just a selected sampling. They were so relatively 'gentle' I could laugh. So why don't you start laughing? Laugh at me who was continuously spit on and bullied?"

After experiencing all this, it is impressive she can still muster up her courage and throw herself into battle again.

Her 'core' is strong, and this is why she can still stand up and enter this high school.

So this is what's going on.

But.....This is not enough to explain some of the things I noticed.

"Are these the only torments that you experienced?"

"What....."

"What you said, were they the whole truth?"

I feel feel there is still something critical that shattered her heart.

That abnormal way of showing her terrors couldn't help but make me think that there's something else behind it.

Karuizawa is hiding something that is worth as much as giving up her body.

"What, are you hiding?"

"Wha, nothin....."

In an instance, Karuizawa turned her head and her gaze to her left waist.

I noticed that, and reached my hand to touch it.

"St, stop!"

Her shout were rudely contained by the surrounding walls, and echoed in the empty hallway.

But, my suspicion was confirmed by her yelling. I grabbed her uniform and pulled it up. On her beautiful skin laid an ugly scar. A scar that can only be caused by a sharp blade slicing deeply through it.

"Is this your darkness?"

"Fu, hu, huhu.....!"

This scar is not a product of mere kids tormenting each other.

A scar this deep must have gravely endangered her life.

Even if her past carries such baggage, she still chooses to stand up.

In the last few days I have been observing this woman called Karuizawa Kei. This person, to protect herself, forcefully dragged surrounding people into her camps. Even if she receives disdains from her action, she still want to protect her status.

"Despair comes in many shapes and forms; But what you have experienced was, indisputably, despair."

Karuizawa's darkness. Here pupils. They overlapped with him.

Those who choose to carries their darkness with them are attracted. And then, devoured upon by one another.

And finally, those who carries darkness, will envelope the other's darkness with themselves.

"Wh, what....You.....!"

If this person is being restrained by her past, then all I need to do is forcibly release her from its binds.

Even if I do not know her deeply, but I can feel the darkness she has.

Yes.....This world has much more things that Karuizawa has not experienced. In deeper places, even more vile darkness has taken root.

"I can promise you one thing, and that is from now on I will protect you from intimidation. I am much more reliable than Hirata and Machida."

"You mean you can stop Manabe and her gang.....?"

"What you should do now is to decide how trustworthy my words are. A tiny kinder is easy to blown out, but a larger flame would have the opposite effect. At the end, the fire will evolve to something that no gust or wind can extinguish. You will act on my behalf. I will act on your behalf. Your emotion does not and should not come into play here. Do you agree with this relationship?"

"First let's get rid of your worries."

I said, and held my phone out.

"I have a way to stop Manabe's actions."

And then, I turned on my screen.

On my phone was a photo of Karuizawa being assaulted by Manabe's gang.

"This is....."

"If I send this to them, they should reconsider doing any more things to you. If they still decide to pursue you by spreading rumors, this would give me good ammunition to intervene."

As for Manabe and co, this particular incident should sooth their anger. Needlessly going further would only put them into unfavorable positions.

I let go of her cheeks, then with an emotionless tone I told her-

"I am only seeking someone to assist me. I hope that in the future, you will be my aid when needs arise."

"What, my aid? What do you want me to do....."

"If the current situation continues, D class will never overtake A class. While D class's members' individual abilities are passable, but we are

severely lacking in cohesion. We are like beach sand. However, if you can control the girls for me, this situation will gradually turn for the better.

And that makes you, a more valuable being than Horikita, who only knows how to fight alone.

"You, what are you doing....."

She must have thought that I am just a normal everyday person, so seeing me in this state must have creep her out. But I won't explain myself. The less words, the more terrifying, and the lesser she resists.

"The first step of our cooperation shall be to lead our group to victory for this exam."

"Victory? But how do-"

"Because you are-, isn't that right?"

When she heard the key word, Karuizawa widened her eyes and looked at me.

As if the truth is reverberating inside the pupils, and mind, her eyes. I presented the truth to her.

Karuizawa looked slightly puzzled, but that might just as well.

Because a parasite can only live by attaching itself to a host.

And now that Karuizawa has attached to me, a new host. Her life now has no way to move forward but with me.

Epilogue: Each Person's Difference

The final day of the exam had begun. And unlike the time on the uninhabited island, time passes quickly in the luxurious ship. Furthermore, each day two hours of discussion time passed without much content actually being discussed.

While both Ryuen's united front plan and Katsuragi's fortress plan proceeded as usual, Class B's Ichinose Honami spent her time without being able to come up with a counterattack against those strategies.

"Waah. I pulled it again! Maybe I'm just bad at Old Maid?" Ichinose says while scattering the cards in her hand in front of me. Despite this being the fifth discussion period we've had, Ichinose once again suggested playing cards. I would have questioned this approach, but it seems no one in Class A is willing to come forth for the discussion. So only a small group of people who thought it would be better to play than spend time aimlessly joined in the card games.

Manabe and the others' contact with Karuizawa was a bit worrying, but it seems the effect of sending her those images worked excellently. And now they're obediently steering clear of her. Karuizawa also believed in that and acted normal as usual.

On the other hand, looking it from Manabe's perspective, the mysterious person who sent the chat must have been either me or Yukimura who were both present at the emergency staircase incident. I did add in the chat that I received the images from a fellow classmate, but it's clear that either one of the two who were present there must have been the one to have taken the pictures.

Either that or those pictures must have been spread around to the mysterious person who sent the chat as something interesting. Manabe must have gotten that sort of idea from all this.

As long as she cannot ascertain for sure that it was me who was responsible for that, she cannot take action against me. Because there's no point in figuring out the identity of the person who took those pictures after all.

"Is it ok for me to stay here like this?..."

Yukimura said that while sitting next to me with a gloomy, depressed expression.

"You're being gloomy, Yukimura-kun. This is where you play your heart out and shake out your anger. Rematch. Rematch!".

"I'll pass on that. I don't feel like it anyway. More importantly, is this fine, Ichinose-san? Ending the exam like this. I thought you were the one holding the reins to this group and guiding us all through the dialogue" Yukimura asks Ichinose.

And in response to that, Ichinose, whose hands had been holding the cards, briefly stopped.

"Isn't that being too convenient for yourself, Yukimura-kun? If you really want to win, don't rely on someone else to do it for you and use your own power to win" Ichinose retorts to Yukimura.

"...I understand that much. I understand" Yukimura replied.

The fact that he cannot afford having that responsibility thrust onto him, I'm sure Yukimura is also aware of that fact. But despite knowing, I suppose he still wanted to change this resigned atmosphere.

Yukimura, who holds top level grades, would be one of the most reliable ones if the exam were purely measuring our academic prowess. But just because you are gifted academically, that doesn't not always translate into raising people's spirits up. It's not like they can come up

with novel ideas just like that. There are things in the world that cannot be done simply by memorizing words and equations.

Over the summer holidays, the two special exams we've had, even Horikita was forced to confront her powerlessness in the face of that.

I wonder whether in this stalemate of a situation, Ichinose and Machida and the others also feel this irritation.

However, even that frustration, as long as it does not end up breaking your spirits, can eventually be used to power you.

1

"And with the next meeting, the exam will be over. How are things on your side, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I am having my last meeting with Horikita. The world outside has already been enveloped by darkness. The records of our conversation remain in the chatlog. To avoid that, we are currently meeting face-to-face.

"No particular change on my side. It looks like the "target" will be able to safely escape. How about you?" I asked her.

I had thought I couldn't expect much from Horikita, but...

"I will win" she briefly replied like that.

"So you've found the "target" then?" I asked. "I don't know who's listening in on us where so I cannot tell you the details yet, but, I won't mind if you believe in me. Everything will go well" Horikita replied to me. From Hirata I've already heard that the (Dragon) group's "target" is

Kushida. Of course, I'm sure Ryuuen and Kanzaki have already done everything in their power to figure her out. But it looks like Horikita has successfully navigated the way to safety and survived it.

If she's this confident, I'm sure there's not much to worry about. We'll just have to wait for 500,000 points to roll in later on. It could even be described as a solid victory for us in that case. "Did you perhaps want to consult me?" she asks.

"There's no need for that. You make your move however you like" I told her. Even if she told me about the (Dragon) group, it's not like I can do much to help her anyways. "So, you said you needed to talk to me about something, what is it? I would like to avoid careless contact if possible" Horikita tells me.

Perhaps she's wary of the existence of Ryuuen who has been stalking Horikita...perhaps. I don't feel any kindness from her attitude, but it would be troublesome for me even if Horikita suddenly takes a kind attitude towards me.

"You can't afford to be terrified by Ryuuen's gaze forever you know" I told Horikita. "Judging from that tone, can I assume you have a plan?" she asks me.

But it looks like she wasn't expecting much from me, since she seemed surprise when I nodded in response to that. "I've pulled Hirata over to our side. I believe I can build a cooperative relationship with him in the future" I told Horikita.

"I don't really want any of that" she replies. "That's fine. I'm not asking you to get involved with Hirata personally. I will handle the talk with Hirata so just match my pace" I said. "...I don't like this. I don't like you moving around like that behind my back" Horikita told me.

I thought she'd say something like this.

"Then show your face when we discuss things then. Even if you can't force yourself to say something, you can keep up with the discussion so there's no problem there right?" I asked her.

"I....suppose so".

It still seemed as though she were dissatisfied, but if I give Horikita the option of participating or not participating, she can't refuse. Also, the existence of Hirata is a boon for the class, and after seeing his leadership on the uninhabited island, Horikita will surely understand that too.

"Including Hirata too, there's a person I'd like to introduce you to. Please free up some time before the end of the exam" I told her.

"I still don't like it. Don't include more people than needed" she replies. "Please consider it a consequence of you standing on the front lines. Besides, that person will surely be useful to us" I told her. "I think I can more or less understand what's going on...but fine. Let's meet here right after the exam ends then" Horikita replied to me. After exchanging that promise, I look at the time on my phone. The last discussion will take place in 30 minutes.

"In this exam, I wonder how many groups will be decided by traitors?" Horikita said. "I wonder. I was surprised that the (Cow) group's exam suddenly ended, but I doubt something like that will be repeated. I think the likeliest outcomes will be the "target" escaping with the time of the exam running out" I replied. "I suppose so. I think that too".

And only for a moment, Horikita averted her eyes. That's an unconscious gesture humans make when they are concerned about

something. "What's wrong?" I asked her. "Nothing. It's just, I just sensed something wrong with the way this exam developed. But there shouldn't have been any errors. I definitely shouldn't lose" she told me. It seems some of the anxieties she'd been storing up in her slightly leaked out. Even if I offered words of encouragement, I'm sure she'll see it as unnecessary trouble. So I decided to simply keep quiet.

2

The members of the (Rabbit) group, without having come any closer to making a breakthrough in the exam, entered the sixth and final discussion. Since I wanted to consider my idea calmly and rationally for a bit, I decided to leave the room where Hirata and the others were and started heading for the group discussion room. Since there was still around 30 minutes left until the start of the discussion, it was obvious that no one would be there yet.

But, those expectations were overturned by the unexpected existence of a person...

"...a prior arrival huh?"

It was the figure of a girl sleeping on the floor in a room when nobody was supposed to have been there yet. Even so, I wonder why her skirt tickles a man's heart so much. This is bad, bad. Since she was lying down, Ichinose's plump thighs were even more apparent than usual and towards the skirt which I cannot see the inside of, I found myself unable to take my eyes off them. If there was a man here who did not feel that towards Ichinose, then he's either gay or bisexual. This is a fate a healthy boy cannot escape from.

Even though I thought it was pointless, I couldn't help but look from her thighs to her feet, then to her face, then to her breasts, and then back down to her thighs. My gaze flickers between them. While feeling

frustrated at this age, I was suddenly distracted by something further back to the back of Ichinose's head. Namely, the phone she must have been using prior to falling asleep.

In the phone assigned by the school, quite a bit of information is recorded. And not only does it play an important role in this exam, but it also allows you to determine each individual's points. Naturally to confirm this, things such as a personal ID and passwords are required, but to avoid the hassle of having to log in every time one wishes to check this, there are many cases of students storing such information on a mobile terminal as well. That means, in other words, if I can steal Ichinose's phone right now, I would be able to ascertain Ichinose's living standards and the amount of points she holds. A while ago, I've already determined that to bypass her ID and password, Ichinose also stores her information on a mobile terminal.



If that situation has not changed, I will be able to gain information.
Slowly and cautiously, I approach her.

"...uuuuu".

"Woah"

As the distance between us closes, perhaps the atmosphere changed and she sensed another person's presence, but Ichinose slightly stirred. But then she immediately fell asleep again. It seems I've managed to make it without waking her up. I close our distance again.

"...nnn".

I wonder what I'm even doing. Even though it's for the sake of gathering information, if anyone sees this, they would only see me as a pervert. What if Ichinose wakes up while I have my back to her? I feel like I'm doing something I shouldn't be doing.

Since the discussion starts in 30 minutes, there's no problem even if I came early, but if so, shouldn't I be calmly waiting inside the room? If there's nothing I should feel guilty about, I should act normal. Step by step, I close my distance with Ichinose.

"...nnnnn...munyumunyu".

This is impossible. Every time I make a move, Ichinose constantly shows signs of waking up. To test this hypothesis, I try moving my feet on the spot without actually moving. If Ichinose responds to this, I can infer from that that she's a light sleeper. It's said that people who are light sleepers cautious people...

...this is pathetic

Why am I sneaking around like this? But strangely, she doesn't talk in her sleep though.

But if anyone sees me now, all they would see is the word pervert.

Having recognized my own behaviour as a stupid endeavor, I gave up on stealing her phone and took my distance from her again.

Then I sat down at a far distance from Ichinose.

From this vantage point, there's no risk of accidentally seeing the secrets hidden up her thighs.

And I won't accidentally make contact with her as well this way.

More importantly, since it's quite early. I wonder when exactly Ichinose arrived here.

Then, around 20 minutes before the discussion was due to start, cute music rang out in the room. It came from Ichinose's phone.

"...nnnn"

While still keeping her eyes closed, she reaches out for her phone and operating her phone's screen, she stops the music. It seems the music came from the alarm she had set. While still looking sleepy, Ichinose raises herself off the floor and notices the foreign presence, namely my existence, in the room.

I was wondering what to do if she made a disgusted face towards my presence, but she wasn't even worried about it at all.

"Gooooood morning, Ayanokouji-kun. Sorry, did my alarm startle you?" she asked.

"No. Not particularly. Looks like you slept well".

"Ahahahaha. Sorry sorry. I just suddenly fell asleep. You're early, there's still 20 minutes left".

"Same to you. Since when have you been here?"

"Since an hour ago. I just wanted to spend some time quietly. If it's in my room, it's quite rowdy with my friends going in and out after all" she replied.

It seems this was the best place for her to take a nap.

"Besides. I wanted to collect my thoughts too"

More than being refreshed from her sleep, her face seemed more as though she's had a flash of insight.

"Did you get any results?" I asked.

"More or less"

Then standing up, Ichinose for some reason, walked across the room to me and sat down beside me.

A room with only two people present, and an ever closing distance. I couldn't hide my nervousness in this situation but it seems Ichinose hasn't noticed at all.

"There's still time left before the exam so shall we have a little chat? If I'm not annoying you, that is" she asks.

"No. It's not annoying in particular. If you're ok with it, I'm down to chat" I replied to her.

"Then it's decided. The truth is, there's something I wanted to ask Ayanokouji-kun. I've also asked this of all my classmates, including the boys like Kanzaki-kun too. But I haven't heard the opinions of the other classes too, so I got curious. Ayanokouji-kun, have you ever strongly wanted to rise to Class A?" she asks me.

I was wondering what question she would choose to hit with me, but it was a surprisingly common question to be asked.

"Of course, I do think about that. No...More than wanting to rise to Class A, it's more that I 'have' to aim for Class A. That would be a more appropriate way of putting it" I tell her.

"In other words...because of the guarantee of a good career and job placement?"

In this school, students are divided into classes A to D and made to compete. But the maximum privilege of being able to go to any university and gain any employment after graduation is only afforded to Class A. It

was written ambiguously on the school pamphlet so it might seem like fraud at first though.

"In this day and age, after graduation you won't be able to keep up with your life and job, especially when it comes to being employed" I said.

"I suppose that's true. I think so too. But having too much faith in the system is also dangerous, don't you think? In 99.9% of the words they say, there are invisible pitfalls that our eyes cannot see" she said.

Of course the pitfall that Ichinose is talking about is likely the '99.9% guaranteed employment rate and educational advancement' touted by the school. For instance, if I wanted to become a professional basketball player yet lacks the necessary experience, the school would attempt to find me ways to push me up to the professional level. Furthermore, this school is also a breeding ground for interpersonal connections. But just because you play basketball regularly, or have graduated from a famous university or school, does not necessarily guarantee your future.

The people who achieve the dreams they've stated from the start, are only a small fraction. According to certain statistics, only one out of six elementary school students achieve their dreams.

At first glance, this seems like a high probability but the data is ambiguous at best and the standards of the statistics are blurred. Becoming a professional basketball player successfully does not mean you become a first-rate player. Players belonging to professional basketball for instance, including trainees, will number around 900 or 1000 people. However, only by playing on the regular and competing against and winning against your rivals can one achieve their dream. In the end, only 100 of those people will have successfully achieved their dreams.

In other words, aiming for your dream and successfully accomplishing it has a very low probability. In any case, achieving a dream is extremely difficult to do. Many students simply repeat their boring lives over and over while speaking vaguely of their dreams. But if one seriously desires to make their dream come true, they would need a lot of effort and luck.

"But even so this school...if you think about it, has massive influence doesn't it? And many people have succeeded in life because of its assistance. Or are you saying you're not interested in it, Ichinose?" I asked.

"No such thing. Even I have a dream, to graduate from Class A. And also a dream I want to fulfill" Ichinose said. And even though she said it with a smile, I could see an unwavering, strong feeling in her eyes.

"The school system is good and all, but if you cannot graduate from Class A, your prospects are dim. Because the school operates on realism, if you cannot win using your own talents, there's nothing you can do about it. And most importantly, students are assigned to classes based on their merits so right now, between me and Ayanokouji-kun here, only one of us could achieve their dreams by moving to the top. Aah, but there are also cases where neither of our dreams can be fulfilled though" she continued.

In other words, even though we are sitting here and chatting like friends, only one class can be the winner in the end. The remaining three classes won't share in those rewards.

"Did you hear there are also exceptions to those rules?" she finally said.

"Hmm? Is that where individuals accumulate 20 million points?" I asked.

"Yep. It seems no one has achieved something like that in the history of the school, but there are Ultra C's like that too" Ichinose replied.

"Yeah, yeah. If we factor that in too, it's possible that the two of us can both graduate from Class A" Ichinose said.

"The problem is whether you can save up 20 million points or not in the first place, even if you save up points in the exams, the system's already set so it won't reach 20 million" I replied.

If we only look at this special exam, depending on your actions throughout it, it is possible to receive a large amount of points. And only two such exams have been conducted so far. From this point onwards, it's possible for both the amount of points that can be earned to be narrowed down and for them to be eaten up by large penalties.

"I suppose that's right. If you start saving up your points, by only reaching half of that amount, you would already raise suspicion" Ichinose said.

"That's true. The financial situation in Class D, especially, is terrible. Even though Horikita is doing her best for us, the points earned from the uninhabited island is still far off. No, it's even possible that we may lose those points in this exam. Ichinose, are you saving up points? It doesn't seem to me like you're the type to work hard on getting points" I asked her.

"Ummm...I wonder. I don't know about the others, but I use points sometimes and save them too sometimes I guess. Even though I'm in Class B, I still don't have that many points you know" she said.

In response to my question, Ichinose responds in a very natural tone with no indication that she's hiding something judging solely from her behaviour.

"Ayanokouji-kun"

"Hmm?"

In the next moment, Ichinose suddenly closes the distance with me and turns to face me while staring at my face.

"Looks like you saw it after all, that time"

Beautiful eyes that seem to be sucking me in looked at me without letting go. It seems Ichinose is far smarter than I expected, she's seen through my plans.

"...sorry. While you were using your phone earlier, I just happened to see the screen. I got curious and just wanted to ask you" I replied.

"Ahaha...it's not like I'm blaming you for it. Certainly that's a large amount of points, right?" Ichinose said.

That's right. Before even the end of one semester, Ichinose had already accumulated a large amount of points. Even if I save every point assigned to me monthly every day without using a single point, I still wouldn't be able to save up that much.

"Don't worry. I haven't told anyone else. There's also the possibility that I saw wrong after all. I won't investigate further" I told her.

Even if I investigated, I doubt I would be able to get a satisfactory answer.

"Have you been able to find a way to win?" I asked.

"Ummmm...I guess so. I think I've found a hint".

I thought there was no way she would answer honestly, but whether it be due to her confidence, Ichinose answered in a relaxed tone. It seems like Ichinose is the type to act on her convictions without wasting time after all.

"Then this fight...it becomes a battle to see whether A will win or B will end" I said.

"I won't know that until the curtains fall. The victory I'm aiming for is---"

But before she could finish, as the time for the group discussion to begin draws closer, members of the group started appearing one after the other. The Class A students were the first ones to arrive, however, without so much as exchanging a greeting with us, they simply took their seats.

"What? You're already here, Ayanokouji?"

"Together with Ichinose-dono. Just the two of you. What kind of secret rendezvous were you planning here?".

Both Yukimura and Sotomura bombarded me unilaterally with those questions as they entered the room together. I couldn't register either anxiety nor depression on their faces, so perhaps they have already given up on victory at this point. On the other hand, the students of Class B seemed almost relaxed.

"This is the final one, huh? Have you found any hints?" Hamaguchi asks me after having quietly waited for the group discussion to start in earnest. "Honestly, I have no idea. We haven't been able to establish proper dialogue at all" I answered him.

I did say that, but I have already executed the strategies I had planned out from the start of the exam. It was by using the mail the school had sent to our phones that the "target" had been successfully camouflaged. The (Dragon) group's "target" is Kushida, but what happens if, for instance, Kushida and Horikita were to swap their phones. When looking

at that phone, anyone would only suspect Horikita of being the "target" instead.

And if there were a traitor who learned of this fact, by submitting Horikita's name as the "target", they would make a mistake and victory would be achieved that way.

"Good evening, let's get along". Having briefly said that, Ichinose resumes her stance and smiles as usual. But it's still too soon, because there's still no telling what the other members are hiding and planning.

Besides, if everyone were to focus on the subject at hand, it would become increasingly difficult to camouflage the "target". I had been waiting for Ichinose to continue speaking earlier, but I decided to cut in now.

"If everyone's ok with it..."

"There's something I'd like to say"

Oddly enough, both me and Hamaguchi spoke those words at the same time. "Excuse me, please go on ahead Ayanokouji-kun" he says. "No...by all means, you first. I'm fine speaking later" I replied.

I never expected this coincidence with this timing. A terrible coincidence. My plan itself has no flaws, but if an unexpected problem like this occurs, the effect of my plan may become unstable.

I suppose I can listen to what Hamaguchi has to say first before timing my speech and trying again. In response to me who had been thinking along those lines, Hamaguchi destroyed my expectations in an unexpected manner.

"Then, with your permission. For the past three days, I've been constantly thinking on how best to achieve the first outcome". Hamaguchi

then starts speaking of his plan to the others of (Rabbit) group.

Surprisingly, the contents of his proposal were strikingly similar to the strategy I had planned.

"And finally I came up with only one conclusion, that it's possible for the entire group to aim for the first outcome and a way to make it possible" Hamaguchi continued.

"Is that really true, Hamaguchi?". To the crestfallen eyes of Yukimura and the others who had given up all hope, a glimmer of hope had returned. "Of course. It's an idea I came up with after listening to everyone here, including Ichinose-san and Machida-kun" Hamaguchi said.

"Unbelievable. There's no way the first outcome can be achieved through dialogue alone". The one who objected to this naive, dream-like proposal was of course, Machida. "Let's hear him out first. Hamaguchi-kun isn't the type to speak before thinking". Ichinose followed up for Hamaguchi and created an environment conducive to discussion.

"I will now proceed to show you all my phone. Naturally, there is a mail sent to me by the school. I'm sure you understand what I'm getting at. Since it is prohibited to falsify or alter the mails from the school in any way, there's no risk of being deceived this way. That's why it's a simple matter, just by showing each other our mails, we can find who the "target" is, that is my way of finding the truth" Hamaguchi told us.

"This is stupid. Who would show their mails like this? We still don't know that someone won't betray us the moment we show our mails, there's no one who would go along with this". In response to this plan anyone could have thought up, but no one would agree to, naturally the onlooker Machida was flabbergasted.

"Indeed, because they know there is the possibility of betrayal, the "target" will not show the mail on their phone. But looking at it from the perspective of those who are not the "target", there is little risk in showing the mail. The exam will soon be over, if we don't make our move now, we will not win. If a class were to collaborate to protect the "target", none of them would show their mails. Through this, cornering the "target" is possible" Hamaguchi continued.

"Even if you know the identity of the "target" or the class they belong to, if somebody betrays us it's over. The problem won't be resolved. Are you planning to play the game where the quicker one to betray wins?". Using this strategy, it is indeed possible to figure out the "target"'s identity. But that's all it can do. In the end, it's not like everybody will play fair with each other and answer accordingly.

"Then please shut up. It'll be fine if Machida-kun doesn't participate after all" Hamaguchi said that while refusing to succumb to the uncooperative attitude of the others and proceeded to show us the mail on his phone.

"I agree with Hamaguchi-kun's idea. I'll show mine too". And Beppu of the same Class B also followed suit.

It seems this is not a random, isolated event but rather, without a doubt Ichinose's strategy in action. The development is the same as the strategy I had planned. But, I don't know how far they have thought this through. But if they think everyone will obediently believe those words and show the mails on their phones, that would be nothing but reckless...

"I think this is unexpectedly a good idea. I have no objections to showing my phone too" Ichinose once again smiled as if agreeing to

follow with Hamaguchi's plan. Matching the actions of the others, Ichinose also reaches into the right pocket of her skirt to take her out phone.

"I've been pondering this for a long time now but, I finally understand now after hearing what Hamaguchi-kun's said. Sorry I've kept this hidden until now but..." and with those purposeful words, Ichinose brought out her phone.

I decided to strike now before Ichinose could complete her strategy.

"You're serious aren't you, Ichinose? If you're going to bet on that, then I'll take you up on that offer". Before Ichinose could disclose the contents of her mail, I offered up my own phone. But this was not my own phone but rather, one I had exchanged with a certain person. "Ayanokouji-kun...are you fine with that?".

"Yeah. After listening to Hamaguchi, I think there's no other way than this. Since I'm bad at communicating, the only thing I can do is show you the truth, so that's what I'll do" I told her. "Wait Ayanokouji. I object. There's no way this kind of blunt strategy is going to go well". Yukimura desperately tried to stop me, but I shrugged his words off and simply showed my mail.

And with that, I proved that I was not the "target". And a large amount of water had already accumulated in this invisible dam. If even a hole of 1 centimeter were to be opened, the dam would surely collapse and turn into a muddy stream. This action was the trigger to open that hole. "Hmm...certainly it seems Ayanokouji-kun isn't the "target" either". "Then I'll show mine too".



Now who will follow up? From amongst the large crowd of people still laughing at Hamaguchi's strategy, one girl voiced her approval and consent. It was the person anyone would have least expected. Ibuki Mio. "Are you insane? There's no profit for us in doing this". It was Manabe who objected to Ibuki's risky actions.

But the words Ibuki said in response were indeed, well-reasoned ones. "The ones who are not the "target" themselves, nor belong to the same class as the "target", gain no advantage in keeping the status quo. Class B understands that too. If we do nothing, we will never catch up to the classes above us. That's why they are showing their phones. And I'm thinking the same thing as them. That's all" Ibuki said.

"But that's..."

"Or perhaps, are you the "target" then?" Ibuki said that to Manabe, who was supposed to have been her ally, in a hostile manner befitting an enemy. "N-no t-that's..."

"Then you should be able to show it too, your phone that is" Ibuki tells Manabe. In a way, her words could have been taken as threats to her own allies, but as though they finally understood, Manabe and the others also brought out their phones. The hunt for the "target" was underway. Karuizawa also takes out her phone with a strap on it, and hands it over in front of everyone.

"Karuizawa, you're also going with Ayanokouji? Are you going to follow this strategy too?" Yukimura asks. "I'm just doing this for myself, because I want private points too" Karuizawa replied. The mail from the school had said she was not the "target" too. Karuizawa was considered clear too.

"...ehhh. What should I do?" Sotomura mutters. "Think for yourself, Sotomura. This isn't a compulsory check but a voluntary one, you know". "Uuuu...just get it over with I guess".

In the situation where a lot of students have joined in, having judged that he has no other choice too, Sotomura also moves to show his phone.

However, before he could, Yukimura quickly stopped him. "...do you really think showing it is the right move?" he asks. "Since a while ago, why are you butting in? Perhaps you're the "target" then?". In response to Yukimura who strongly objected to the strategy, Ibuki batters him with that question.

At that moment, everyone could see that Yukimura's expression hardened. "Uwa...you serious?". "No. Yukimura isn't the "target". I heard so earlier after all". I quickly followed up for him. But spontaneous laughter came from some of the students. "Do you really expect us to believe just your words? You might be lying". Manabe said that while casting doubt on Yukimura as a matter of fact.

Indeed, continuing to deny that he is the "target" here will only invite further suspicion on him. He should know that as well. But I cannot make a move here yet. Because Yukimura is---

"It's still too soon to draw a conclusion. Because Yukimura-kun also has a point". Ichinose, who had been watching the series of events unfold, said that as she once again brought out her phone from her left pocket. "I got caught up in the flow for a bit, but I'd also like to show my phone" she said as she once again proves that she is not the "target" to the group. "Wait, Ichinose. Earlier, you said there's something you wanted to tell us. You said you've been keeping quiet about it the whole time?". Not having forgotten about that statement, Machida presses the question onto her. "That? It's just the fact that I also always had the same idea too, that's all" she replies to Machida.

"...the same idea?". "I say the same idea, but as the leader of Class B, I was just regretting having been beaten to the punch by Hamaguchi-kun" Ichinose replies to Machida. In any case, it seems everyone besides

Class A and Yukimura have proven themselves to the group that they are not the "target".

"....."

The students here aren't so imperceptive as to not understand the meaning behind Yukimura's silence. Machida and the other students of Class A too, at some point had approached Yukimura to stare him down. ".....fine I understand. I'll show you. I just have to show you right?". No longer able to bear the peer pressure of everyone being directed at him, Yukimura broke and took out his phone as well. "But before I do so, I want you to promise me just one thing" he said. "Promise? What do you mean by that, Yukimura-kun?".

"That nobody here turn traitor. Everyone here. Especially Class A, I want you to take out your phones and place them where I can see them. No, everyone too. Everyone put your phones where I can see them" Yukimura said.

He had directed that statement at the representative of the group here, Machida, but Machida replies to him in an unamused tone. "I don't understand what you're getting at. What do you mean?" he said to Yukimura. "Exactly what I said. Nothing more and nothing less" Yukimura replies. "Fine. If it's just placing them there". Approaching Yukimura, all the students from Class A took out their phones and placed them in front of him. Having confirmed that fact, without even a cloud of doubt on his expression, Yukimura made his move. Yukimura pulls his phone out of his pocket and lights up its screen, then enters its required 6-digit password and logs into his phone.

Then he opens the mail sent to him from the school and lifts the screen up directly for everyone to see. "...I'm sorry for lying to you, Ayanokouji..."

Yukimura apologizes as he opens up the mail sent from the school. The ones most surprised after seeing the sentence written in the mail would, of course, have to be the members of Class D. "I am the target..." Yukimura said. On the screen was a mail different from what everyone else had received. "W-what Y-Yukimura-dono was the "target" all along?" Sotomura looks at him with astonished eyes. This also means that we have effectively relinquished the 500,000 points that would otherwise have been given to Class D. However, this very Yukimura is the person who I have exchanged phones with in secret.

"If I knew things would end up like this, I would have talked from the start" Yukimura said. Karuizawa also seemed shocked from the bottom of her heart and her expression showed unease. Looking at the perspective of those two who would have never thought of Yukimura as the "target", it makes sense. Machida then stood up and peered at the mail on Yukimura's phone once more. "It seems the mail is real. All the other personal mails also seem to be Yukimura's without a doubt" Machida said after having checked even Yukimura's private chats without permission.

Towards the Machida who approached the situation with suspicion, Ichinose tried to explain the situation calmly. "There's no way it would be a fake. After all, you know the rules the school put in place. In regards to the mails sent by the school concerning the exam, copying the mail and transferring it are explicitly forbidden. As long as the mail is sent from the school's address, the possibility of it being fake is zero" Ichinose says. Exactly, from the start, fabricating information in this exam is expressly forbidden. Since the punishment known as expulsion awaits those who break the rule, everything that's laid out here has to be nothing but the truth.

Even if one overcomes this obstacle by lying here, the problem will still await them after the end of the exam hence the outcome would be the

same either way. "That means it's definitely Yukimura-kun then". Manabe nods in agreement. The important thing here was the condition that Yukimura's mail be shown after all. Whether the person holding that phone is indeed the owner of that phone or not...is irrelevant. In other words, making a decision on whether the person in question owns the phone or not is a surprisingly difficult task.

Especially for students on guard during the exam, the idea that someone may have switched out their phones with another person is not a particularly unexpected hypothesis to make. However, casually entering the 6-digit password and unlocking the phone in front of them makes things different.

There's no way a student can know another student's password. They would inevitably draw such a conclusion almost unconsciously by assuming it would be so if it were their phone. This is not rooted in reasoning but rather a preconception that's been planted in their minds over many years.

"I'm sorry Yukimura-kun...I thought of this as a last resort...".

"No. I think this is the right thing to do. I tried to somehow lie my way out of this. But that was wrong. I'm sure Ayanokouji and Sotomura, and also Karuizawa would feel this is the right thing" Yukimura replied.

By saying that, he made himself out to look like the person who tried to safely secure points only for himself.

"...with this everyone should know the "target" is me. So you should've all arrived at an answer" he continued.

That's right, by clearing the exam together with everyone, the entire group can earn 500,000 points. The first outcome that seemed unachievable at first may be obtained now.

Ichinose nods her head once then once again, with more strength than before, she pleads with Class A.

"Please. Let's not waste Yukimura-kun's courage. Please cooperate with us. Don't betray us". "We were just following Katsuragi-san's instructions from the start. We won't do anything on our own" Machida replies to Ichinose.

He did say that, but before the end of the exam, there will be a period in which we will definitely have to disband as a group. Before the exam ends, for that blank period of 30 minutes, we must trust in not only our classmates but students of other classes as well.

"I want to believe...no, I believe in everyone..." Yukimura says that as if it were a wish. And every class receives that equally. I wonder if the students who spent the same time together over the past few days have gained something resembling a friendship.

I wonder if they'll accept Yukimura's feelings, and be able to cooperate together to victory. No, such a thing is impossible. I'm sure with this, somebody will definitely turn traitor.

And if so, we of Class D who have switched our phones amongst each other will surely win.

Yukimura must have surely believed in that. He must have been struggling to keep himself from bursting out in laughter. However, the pleasure he must have been feeling evaporated, when the phone Yukimura was holding in his hand suddenly rang and resounded in the room. Yukimura was the one shocked more than anyone else by the incoming call. In his rush to grab the phone back from the table, he stumbled and lost the phone from his hand. By a coincidence, with its

screen the right side up, it fell right in front of us. Since it was in silent mode, it sent vibrations through the table as it continued to vibrate.

The name of the caller was---'Ichinose'.

She, while holding the phone up to her ears, looked at Yukimura, and then me with serious eyes. "What are you doing, Ichinose? There's no point in calling Yukimura's phone at a time like this". Machida said that while looking at Ichinose with an astonished face. Having created a situation where only me and Yukimura could possibly understand the meaning, Ichinose quietly ends her call.

"The school said that 'altering or copying the mail' is forbidden. That's why we believed the mail in front of our eyes was undoubtedly real. That much is certain. But there's no rule saying you cannot deceive someone with the phone itself. Do you understand what that means?" Ichinose says while picking up the fallen phone and giving it back not to Yukimura, but to me.

"The person who owns the phone with the "target" mail written on it, it's you isn't it, Ayanokouji-kun? Because just now, I didn't call Yukimura-kun's phone, but Ayanokouji-kun's after all" Ichinose said.

I exchanged my contact number with Ichinose a while ago. That's why she knew my number. No, even if she didn't know, she would have done her research to figure out my number anyways. "B-but isn't it strange? Yukimura was able to unlock the phone's password in front of our eyes. I also checked his private mails and history in front of everyone's eyes" Machida said.

"That's faked. He could easily know the password just by asking Ayanokouji-kun beforehand. Also, all call history, mail and even applications can be replicated even though quite a bit of effort must have been needed for that" Ichinose replied.

After having heard that, Machida changed his expression and quickly grabbed the phone that had been returned to me.

"People can't lie so easily, you know. Especially when the goal is in sight, they will inevitably become anxious and openings will reveal themselves. Yukimura-kun lied, and that's why his gestures and attitude appeared different from usual and appeared suspicious" Ichinose said, having completely seen through my attempt at a camouflage.

Having heard her deduction, Yukimura's face had already turned pale. No, it's doubtful he even heard it all.

"We've also been thinking about it for a while, if the "target" were in our class there's always the option of simply switching phones with them. Using the password to pass oneself off as the "target" was also one of the things we thought of" Ichinose said.

It seems, the strategy I came up with was already thought of by Ichinose and the others.

"But you see, there is a weakness in that strategy. It's the fact that a phone number exists. Even if you can perfectly replicate your history and apps, you can't do anything with your number. Once, me and Hamaguchi-kun tried swapping out SIM cards, however, the SIM cards we were provided were locked onto our specific terminals so even if we swapped it, we couldn't use our swapped SIM cards. That means if you've swapped your cards too, I wouldn't have been able to call you. It doesn't matter who switched phones with who, as soon as I call that number, I can easily find out who the real owner is. If I couldn't do this, I wouldn't have even come up with the plan to reveal our phones after all" Ichinose continued.



In other words, Ichinose and the others only used this sort of forceful tactic to see through the lie. The fact that Hamaguchi suddenly started on this topic too, was naturally a part of their plan. So this is the moment the truth that Yukimura and I had changed our phones comes to light.

"Simply exchanging phones and replicating the history went perfectly this far, but you must have never expected that we would use the fact that the SIM cards are locked to specific terminals to check, did you?" Ichinose says. Fuuuu~ she then exhaled. At that moment, the announcement that the 1 hour discussion period ends in five minutes came in.

We were ordered to disband the group within five minutes and promptly return to our own rooms.

"Shit!". That scream by Yukimura came from his heart. It was a truthful and honest scream without any deception behind it.

"Too bad, Yukimura. That was a good try, though" Machida and the others said that while grinning and laughing.

They said that so that Yukimura, who was seen through completely, would be thoroughly humiliated.

They also glanced at me, the person they must have believed to be the orchestrator of this strategy. But even with the anxious Yukimura and Class D, and the surprised Class C and A. There must have been a lot of things they wanted to talk about, but the rules now prohibit us from discussing any further.

"In any case, we've already determined that Ayanokouji-kun is the "target". Machida-kun, promise me that we will aim for the first outcome together without betraying anyone" Ichinose asks Machida that.

"Naturally. Trust in me, let's go" Machida promptly replied to her.

Having been called by their friends, the three students of Class A were the fastest ones out of the room.

"The ones who believe will be saved, you know. I will never betray you. That's why I also want Class C to do the same. You just have to bear with

it for 30 minutes" Ichinose tells the students of Class C.

Manabe and the others simply nod their heads in response. Yukimura glanced to the phone I held in my hands.

"I was a fool for following your plan. This is the worst" he said.

And then one after another, everyone left the room, leaving me and Ichinose alone.

"Now we just have to trust everyone" she said.

"Yeah...I suppose so"

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're quite calm. Aren't you worried?" she asks.

"I can't do anything but believe in the others after all...I'm going back to my room" I told her.

There's nothing else to be gained even if I stay here any longer.

"Hey, wait a minute"

Ichinose stops me by putting a hand on my shoulder.

At that moment I sensed that the space between us would soon become a tense one.

"Who was the one that came up with this plan to swap phones?" she asks me.

"Of course, that's Horikita" I replied.

"I see. Then please tell Horikita-san, that her plan was a huge success"

"Huge success? Don't you mean to say huge failure? It was a crushing and disastrous defeat. Ichinose saw through everything after all" I told her.

"Ahahahaha. You didn't expect us to have thought of the same plan did you?" she replied.

"Sorry. For lying to you like that, even after I agreed to an alliance with you. Are you angry at me?" I asked Ichinose.

"Of course not. We also started our own plan without your knowledge, so we're even" she replied to me.

"I see. I'm sure Horikita will also be relieved to hear that" I told her.

Having said that, I grabbed my phone and moved to leave the room.

"Waa, wait wait. The important part's not over yet" she stopped me again.

"The important part?"

"Mou---You're bad at dealing with people, Ayanokouji-kun. Indeed the SIM cards we're given are locked onto their terminals. But, there's a way to release that lock...right? I asked Hoshinomiya-sensei to check but, it seems with enough points, you can unlock the terminal lock right away. That's what she told me" Ichinose said.

Chiri. In that instant, I felt as if an electric current ran through the back of my head.

"The answer that comes after a false answer is revealed. Most people will take that to be truth. After Yukimura-kun, who solved the password to unlock the phone, was outed as not being the "target". The moment that lie was revealed, the truth that Ayanokouji-kun is the "target" reared its head. And the fact of the SIM card sealed the deal. Nobody would suspect anyone other than Ayanokouji-kun now. But that itself is the real trap. I did say the swapping strategy is imperfect, but that was a lie. Because that strategy is an extremely effective one. But of course, you need to make a double-layered trap for it. If this trap is laid out, the truth will forever be buried in darkness. There would no longer be a way to

ascertain who the real "target" is with 100% certainty" Ichinose continued on.

This Ichinose, she's seen the plan behind the plan. She's realized the truth that I'd kept hidden even from Yukimura. Firstly, the premise is that I'm not the "target". But I approached Yukimura under the guise of being the "target". As proof, I had used the real "target"'s phone to make contact with him after all. But the real "target" and owner of that phone was Karuizawa. She's hidden that fact very well. The only one she secretly told that fact to was Hirata. Hirata also kept that truth hidden from both me and Yukimura who belonged to that same group at first. That's why he pretended not to know anything when we talked about the "target". But after I learned about Karuizawa and Hirata's pasts, he told me about Karuizawa's identity as the "target". And after I used Manabe to bully Karuizawa, I used that situation to swap our phones.

Naturally replicating the same mails and history as I did with Yukimura. Then I released the SIM card lock using points. This procedure was hardly illegal and can easily be done at a mass retailer as a complimentary service. This may be a ship, but as long as this exam requires the use of phones, a place was prepared where students can have their phones repaired or replaced in case of damage. That's why, while using Karuizawa's phone, I was able to transfer over the number as well. Furthermore, from that point onwards, I had swapped that phone with Yukimura's. Of course, I only told him that it was 'my' phone and Yukimura had believed me. If the truth ever comes out, he will surely be upset and irritated at me.

If it were a simple person, they would have never noticed Yukimura and I had switched phones. If it were a smart person, they would have noticed the swap and accused me of being the real "target" instead. But they

would have never arrived at the conclusion that Karuizawa was the real "target". That was the cell phone swapping plan I had come up with.

"If Class D didn't have the "target" in it, what would you have done?"
Ichinose asks me.

"Same as you. I'd tried to figure out who was the "target" amongst the classes, swap phones with them, and pass myself off as the real "target" instead" I replied.

If the real "target" comes out after that and points out the deception, the search would be successful, and if for instance they believed Ichinose to be the real "target" instead, the traitor would inevitably answer wrong and the exam would end. In that latter situation, no points would be allocated to Class B and it may be possible to decrease the gap of points between some of the classes.

"So it's out, huh?"

Ichinose then started pulling out phones from her left and right pockets. One of them belonged to the "target" from Class B from another group, one of them from another student who wasn't the "target" from another group.

"By the way, this is just my prediction but if I go from the flow of today's discussion---"

Ichinose then quickly wrote a message on her phone.

"The identity of the "target" is Karuizawa Kei-san. Correct?"

Having wrote that, she shows me her screen. That was the 'betrayal' mail she was going to send to the school now. But before anything could

happen, my phone and Ichinose's both rang at the same time.

"The exam for the (Rabbit) group has now ended. Please wait for the announcement of results"

"Aaah...somebody betrayed us in the end, huh? It's either Class A or C, one of them" she said.

"Why did you suspect Karuizawa?" I asked her.

"The same reason as Yukimura-kun. Because she's been acting different from usual too. She usually doesn't care about Ayanokouji-kun, but she's been looking at you quite a lot, and she's been making faces at you more than necessary. But that wasn't certain proof that Karuizawa-san was the "target" either, so either way I wouldn't have sent that mail" Ichinose replied to me.

It seems the plan I had set up, has been completely seen through by Ichinose.

"Why didn't you tell anyone about that? That way, the lie would have been revealed" I asked her.

Ichinose just laughed. Her smile right now was a deep and genuine one, the deepest and most genuine one I had ever seen.

"That's obvious, isn't it? A or C, if either one of them gets it wrong, it's still a plus for us. From the start, I had neither intended on clearing it together with everyone through outcome 1 nor betraying everyone through outcome 3. The moment the "target" wasn't in Class B, I had

always intended to let another class betray us on purpose. I think the betrayer this time is from Class A" she said.

"Machida, huh?"

"No, no. It's Morishige-kun. He's from Sakayanagi-san's faction. He probably doesn't want to meekly obey the Katsuragi faction. He probably thought it was better to betray and just take the points, that would be about it?" Ichinose replies to me.

While strangely laughing, she turns her back to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're unexpectedly amazing. The conversation you just had with me, was made up on the spot wasn't it?" she asks.

"If you're going to praise, praise Horikita. She just gave me several hypothetical situations and I obeyed her orders is all" I told her in reply.

It seems I'm going to need to reevaluate the person known as Ichinose Honami. She's managed to thoroughly avoid taking any risks at the same time devising a strategy to come out victorious. I have no right to complain.

"I'll be leaving then. It'll be bad if we end up breaking the rules" she told me.

But as Ichinose was saying that, our phones played a unique tone simultaneously. And not just once or twice, but four consecutive times in a short amount of time.

"W-What does this mean?"

Ichinose seemed to be genuinely shocked from the bottom of her heart, as we both gazed at the screens of our phones.

The ship sailing in the deep dark sea, seemed somewhat lonely.

But as the time approached 11 PM, the presence of people gradually increased. When I had noticed, the cafe I was planning on returning to had already shown a huge success and seats were rapidly being filled up one after the other. In front of me, who had secured four seats in advance, a girl approaches.

"...sorry for making you wait". The girl who shyly came over was Karuizawa Kei. Something about her expression seemed to be different than usual.

"Sorry for calling you out this late" I told her.

"No, that's fine...".

Since I had nothing in particular to talk to her about, I simply stared at the scenery colored by silence. But since Karuizawa seemed to be staring at me, I turned to face her as well.

"Ahh, umm...I was wondering if everything went alright" she asked.

"It's fine. I'm sure the guys from Class A sent the mail to the school with my name on it".

I was able to say this because as insurance, there was one more thing I had besides swapping Karuizawa and Yukimura's phones. Since we had worked together with a predestination in mind to ensure we would be able to synergistically work together, there would be no worries on that front.

"How can you say that for sure?" she asks. "Isn't that because the paper you gave me meant something, Ayanokouji-kun?". The existence that crept up from behind me, surprised us enough to make Karuizawa jump a little. It couldn't be helped, because that existence was the boy that Karuizawa had tried to break up with, Hirata.

"Good work on the exam, both of you. Mind if I take a seat?" he asks.
"Of course".

Karuizawa shifted uncomfortably and looked away from Hirata, but did not show any signs of outright rejecting him. It is now 10:55 PM. In 5 more minutes, a mail will be sent to all the students.

"It's almost time. Is Horikita-san not coming yet? Shouldn't we contact her?".

"She's the type to always cut it close. We can afford to wait another four minutes" I replied.

"Ahh. It looks like she's here". It seems at least in this case, Horikita has arrived faster than I had expected her to.

"Haa~ If I see this bunch meeting in front of my eyes like this, I can't help but sigh" Horikita said.

"You've finally arrived. By the way, what's that behind you?" I asked her.

"If you pay any attention to him, you lose. Just think of him as a ghost riding my back and ignore him that way" Horikita replied.

"Don't say that, Horikita. I thought you would be anxious during the exam period and I got worried about you, that's why I called out to you like that"

I had not seen him around recently, but Sudou Ken stood beside Horikita almost as if he's stuck to her.

"You're in my way, get lost" Horikita told him.

"D-Don't say that. I challenged this exam with my very best efforts, you know" Sudou replied.

"Then do you have any confidence that you left behind a good result?" she asks.

"...I was only a step away from that. But it looks like someone faster than me sent the mail first" Sudou said.

After having heard that half-hearted excuse from him, it seems Horikita had stopped paying any attention to him. Horikita then takes a seat in the last vacant seat. Sudou panics and quickly moves to pull over a chair from a nearby table.

"You're still in the way" Horikita tells Sudou.

"It's fine, right? I'm just going to listen to you. Also, don't exclude me" he replies to her.

Despite this being a rather unusual gathering of members, it seems Sudou has no interest in hearing our side of things.

"More importantly, the chain of mails we got earlier..."

"Yeah, I was also curious about that"

About roughly 2 hours ago, it was an incident that occurred just as I had parted ways with Ichinose. Four mails were sent to our phones one after another. The contents of those mails informed us of the end of the exam for several groups.

The (Rat) group, the (Horse) group, the (Bird) group and the (Boar) group. All those groups had their exam ended by the appearance of a traitor.

"The (Horse) group is the one where the "target" was Minami-kun, right?"

"Yes. In other words, there's a possibility his identity was uncovered by someone"

"In the other groups, is there a possibility that one of us had sent the mail?" Horikita anxiously asks. If the "target" makes a mistake, the damage they would incur is nothing to laugh at.

"I was inquiring about that and asked around in several groups earlier. As far as the boys' side goes, they're saying none of them are the traitor

that sent the mail" Hirata tells Horikita.

This is of course, assuming they haven't fed us a lie. But to a certain degree, I'm sure we can trust them.

"Was Yamauchi fine?". I asked about the man who was ready to go to extremes if necessary.

"Ahh, umm. That one's fine. Yamauchi-kun was in the (Bird) group, and it seems he did try to send a betrayal mail. But he hesitated for too long, and the exam ended before he could send the mail" Hirata replies to me.

"I don't know who it was from where, but betraying us first before we could was a fine play".

Horikita had predicted that if Yamauchi were to send the betrayal mail, he would have completely gotten the answer wrong. I'm sure she's correct too. He had lost his chance the moment he did not send the mail straight away and hesitated after the end of the exam.

"But we don't know the girls' side" Horikita points out.

"That's fine. I've already checked the girls' side. Nobody sent the mails" Karuizawa replies to Horikita bluntly without any hesitation at all. Since she rules over the girls of Class D, her information gathering abilities are almost as fast as Hirata.

"...I see".

Of course Horikita, who has no such information gathering ability, has no other choice but to accept that answer.

"In the end, this exam. I wonder why the briefing was done with such a small group of people?" Hirata murmurs that question was though he could not grasp the meaning behind it.

"This exam is one that tests 'thinking'. In other words, how we think. It's not like every question has an answer...or something like that" Horikita replies to Hirata.

Indeed, it could be that only by seeing through those pointless bluffs, can we find the answer hidden beneath all the questions. It might be natural to assume that.

"More importantly than that, what I'm worried about is the fact that those four mails came in almost simultaneously. The window for betrayal is 30 minutes. But even so, having all the betrayals happen within the first 1 and 2 minutes. Is it even normal?" Horikita asks.

"Isn't it just...a coincidence?"

It seems from the perspective of Sudou who had just been listening in on our conversation, it may all have seemed like a coincidence.

"When Kouenji-kun sent the betrayal mail, the response from the school was immediate. If we assume that they reply as fast as an automatic response..."

"The possibility that the mails were sent together at once is extremely high. In other words, it may be that it's one class responsible for all the betrayals".

Precisely. I also thought that there was no other possibility but that for four mails to be sent with that timing.

"It may have been that they timed their betrayal mails to let us know it was them who did it"

"Yes. I also cannot think of any alternative reason than that. And there's only one man who would do something like that..." Horikita said.

Horikita and Hirata naturally exchange those words. I'm just grateful this would end without me having to say anything unnecessary.

And there is meaning in using this cafe that we have used many times before, to meet tonight.

"As expected, you were here".

It was so that I could invite the 6th guest, that man. To this place.

"Ryuuen...!!!" Having realized Ryuuen's presence, Sudou stood up as if to intimidate him but Ryuuen did not pay him any attention and simply grabbed a vacant chair before sitting down next to Horikita.

"I thought I'd come and enjoy the results with you. Thanks for being here in such an easy-to-tell place" Ryuuen said.

"Yes. I chose this place especially so that even you with your stupidity would be able to find this place. Thank me" Horikita replied to him.

"But even so, Suzune. This is a rather large gathering for you. What's with the change of heart?" Ryuuen asks Horikita.

Ryuuen said this while looking at the four of us gathered at the table (while ignoring Sudou completely).

"I was bothered by your persistent nagging. I was consulting them about it here" Horikita replies.

"Don't give Horikita any trouble!" Sudou roars at Ryuuen.

"Sudou-kun, shut up" Horikita said.

".....ou.....".

Having been stopped by Horikita, Sudou obediently sinks back into his chair. He's a surprisingly honest one.

"I thought you didn't have any friends that were actually friends. Well that's fine".

This itself is yet another defensive plan I had prepared against Ryuuen. By increasing the amount of people Horikita interacts it, I had effectively created a dummy. Naturally, the amount of people he'd need to keep an eye on would increase and it would become unsustainable for him.

"The results will be announced soon. Did you get any results?"

"More or less. You look pretty relaxed" Horikita replies to Ryuuen.

"Kukuku. I wouldn't be out here if I weren't. It also seems like the same people from last time are here".

"Oh that's right. Last time during the results announcement after acting all high and mighty, you lost miserably" Sudou laughs at Ryuen after seemingly having remembered something and points a finger at him.

And as if to match Sudou's actions, Horikita also looks down at Ryuen with a disgusted expression.

"Stop it, Suzune. If you do this now, you're just going to embarrass yourself later, you know? I already know the "target" of our group" Ryuen said.

Whether those words were the truth or a lie, Horikita was not shaken one bit. Perhaps it's because she already had confidence that she would not lose to Ryuen.

"I'm glad about that. I look forward to the results" Horikita tells Ryuen.

"We don't even need to wait for that. I can tell you who the "target" for the (Dragon) group is now" he replies to Horikita.

"I'm sorry but you just sound like a loser at this point. The exam is already over and no one from the (Dragon) group turned traitor. It can only mean one thing" Horikita said.

It would only mean that Ryuen had finished the exam without realizing that Kushida was the "target". That would be the undeniable truth.

"If you come to know my kindness, you'll be so grateful that you'll wet your crotch" Ryuen tells Horikita.

And using such vulgar language, Ryuen laughs as though he were amused.

"...tell me then. Who is the "target" of the (Dragon) group?" Horikita asks him.

And as if he were waiting for her to say that, Ryuen raised his hand while laughing. He peeps through the gaps of his fingers like a beast, as

if he were preparing to leap on the throat of his prey.

"Kushida Kikyou". Ryuen said that name.

"Ehh?".

Horikita, who had not reacted to any of Ryuen's words until now, froze with a small, surprised voice. It must have been because she was confident that he would absolutely not uncover that identity that she was overwhelmed now. And also, Hirata from the same (Dragon) group seemed shocked too.

"I'm sorry but from the second day of the exam, I already knew that Kushida was the "target" of the group" Ryuen told them.

"This is a joke...right? If so, you could have ended the exam by sending the betrayal mail. But the exam didn't end like that. That means you only realized it after the exam ended through some other means, am I wrong?" Horikita asks him.

"I just felt sorry for you after seeing you try so desperately to protect the identity of the "target", then seeing you so confident, so relaxed and sure about your victory that you would even look down on others. That's why I led you on until the end" Ryuen told Horikita.

"How did you figure it out?" Hirata asks Ryuen in response to his words in a tone that was a mixture of curiosity and fear.

After they tried so hard to protect Kushida's identity, and the fact that there was apparently no traitor. They must have been curious about that.

"Unfortunately the answer to that...involves you, Suzune" Ryuen tells Horikita.

"Me?".

Horikita, right about now, is surely desperately reflecting on the events of the exam in her head, while pretending to still be calm. When, where and how she got seen through.

"I realized it from the movement of your eyes, breathing, movement of your mouth, your tone of voice and everything else about you" Ryuen told Horikita.

"Stop with the jokes".

"Joke? Then are you claiming to know how else I would have known the truth?" Ryuen quickly replies.

"That's...surely you heard that from someone else just now".

"I understand your feelings of not wanting to admit it. That out of everyone in the group, you are the most worthless one. But don't blame yourself for that, Suzune. You just picked the wrong guy to mess with. And besides, the exam was chaotic anyways. In particular, the ones you watched out for most was Class A. Relax" Ryuen told Horikita.

"W-What are you s-saying you've done?" Horikita asks Ryuen.

"You'll know the answer soon enough" he replies.

Apparently the four betrayal mails were all Ryuen's work.

And once 11 PM arrived, a mail arrived in our phones all at once.

And without sparing Ryuen a gaze, we all looked down to see the results.

(Rat) ---> Due to the traitor's correct assessment. Outcome 3.

(Cow) ---> Due to the traitor's wrong assessment. Outcome 4.

(Tiger) ---> Due to the target's identity being protected. Outcome 2.

(Rabbit) ---> Due to the traitor's wrong assessment. Outcome 4.

(Dragon) ---> Due to the entire group's correct assessment after the exam's end. Outcome 1.

(Snake) ---> Due to the target's identity being protected. Outcome 2.
(Horse) ---> Due to the traitor's correct assessment. Outcome 3.
(Sheep) ---> Due to the target's identity being protected. Outcome 2.
(Monkey) ---> Due to the traitor's correct assessment. Outcome 3.
(Bird) ---> Due to the traitor's correct assessment. Outcome 3.
(Dog) ---> Due to the target's identity being protected. Outcome 2.
(Boar) ---> Due to the traitor's correct assessment. Outcome 3.

And based on those results. Increases and decreases in the class and private points in this exam would be as follows. In this case, cl and pr would represent class point and private points respectively.

Class A - Minus 200cl Plus 2 million pr

Class B - No change in cl Plus 2.5 million pr

Class C - Plus 150 cl Plus 5.5 million pr

Class D - Plus 50 cl Plus 3 million pr

"Class C...is the top". Horikita and the others seemed shocked at the results.

"Isn't it great, Suzune? Thanks to your misfortune, the (Dragon) group has gotten the unexpected outcome 1. Now, all the classes should equally receive a large amount of points" Ryuen tells Horikita.

Ryuen then claps his hands and laughs satisfactorily.

"If you bow your head before me and beg. I can tell you the answer" Ryuen tells Horikita.

"Who would do something like that?".

Horikita had started to say that, but quickly and strongly closed her mouth.

"Man. That expression of yours. It's pretty sexy" Ryuen tells Horikita.

Ryuen then takes out his phone from his pocket and places it on the table in front of us for all of us to see. On the screen seems to be a list that Ryuen has managed to put together. Rat, bird, boar. In those groups were written the names of the students suspected to be the "targets" from Class A.

"I discovered the root of this exam and arrived at that. Then I focused on targeting only those of Class A. And this is the proof of that" Ryuen tells us.

In other words, it means Ryuen managed to clear this exam without targeting neither Class D nor Class B and only attacking Class A. Normally, it would have been impossible to pull off such an inconvenient feat. But there's no denying that Ryuen did, in fact, pull it off.

"And I'm sorry to tell you this. But unfortunately, my next target is you, Suzune. In the next exam, I will make sure to especially target you. I will keep going until I have completely torn your mind and heart to pieces" Ryuen declares to Horikita.

No longer having any words to reply to him with, Horikita just kept staring at the results in the mail.

It would mean that Class C now possesses an overwhelming lead on the other classes, having obtained a large amount of points here in this exam.

Now looking back at it, even though Kouenji seemed to have been messing around back then, it was a fine play by him to secure some points for us back then. Otherwise, it would have been Class C's exclusive victory.

Of course Kouenji's actions ended up sending stray bullets flying into the "targets" of the other classes as well.

"Look forward to the second semester". Having paid back the debt from the island test, Ryuen seemed satisfied as he walked away. And the students, despite their victory, did not seem to be celebrating but rather looked worn out.

"I can still accept that Ryuen-kun simply gathered information on Class A's "targets". I can chalk it up to him having a talent we don't have. But how did he get (Dragon) group's result?" Hirata asked.

But there's no need to think particularly hard about this.

"It's not that hard of a task. If you put your mind to it, it's pretty simple".

"What do you mean?"

"Leaving aside the manner of how Ryuen found out the "target"'s identity. All he had to do was announce 'Kushida is the target' before the end of the exam. Of course, nobody would believe in the words of someone like Ryuen. Especially a group of gifted people like that group. But, the closing period alone is different. Even if you answer mistakenly during that window, there would be no risk. As such, even someone playing defense like Katsuragi would be tempted to vote. If even there is 1% chance that Kushida really is the "target", the first outcome would be most convenient to all of them after all" I said.

If he had planted the seeds of it earlier, it is an extremely simple task. But it is something impossible to do normally. It's a task that cannot be accomplished unless everyone trusts that it is indeed Kushida. Is this really possible? Even I cannot imagine how it could have happened. This could not have been a success. How did, leaving aside Class D, he guide everyone to outcome 1 while gaining their trust? Unless he had an 'absolute proof that everyone must believe in'...perhaps.

"Horikita. Just perhaps but---we may face some hurdles in the future".

And not just once or twice, depending on the circumstances, it may involve the whole of Class D even.

"...hurdles from Ryuen-kun? Indeed he managed to do well in this exam, that much is true. But there's no guarantee that he will be able to repeat this in the future. In fact, your group actually won, am I wrong?" Horikita asks me.

"That's right. I might just be overthinking this. Don't worry about it" I replied to Horikita.

Right now it's still nothing but a premonition. But what if this premonition comes true? I can't help but think this may be the first step towards despair. But at the same time, I also began to feel the emotion of 'excitement' start to grow inside of me.

Ichinose Short Story: In the cracks between dream and reality

In front of me, there were a dorayaki and a stromboli.

“I want to eat both!”

The starving me pounced on the two targets with a flying pose.

However, the two escaped at high speed.

“Muu, impressive. Then I won’t hold back either!”

I leaped again, even more swiftly. After that, I directly extended my arm.

But the food once again slipped through my hands and increased the distance with me.

“...Then, how about this?”

I gave up on the stromboli and I only extended my arm towards the dorayaki. This time I didn’t let it run away and I caught it easily. Just when I was calmly thinking about going for the stromboli, it escaped for the third time and increased the distance with me.

And the dorayaki that was in my hands just a moment ago had slipped away without me realizing it.

“This can only mean---”

When I realized what the food represented, they disappeared

and the world dissipated in an instant. After that, I felt the soft ground catching me. Then, I heard the alarm sound I am used to hear coming from near my head.

“Umm~...”

That’s right. I used my dizzy head to grasp the situation. Today is the last day of the special exam. Since I arrived at the room earlier than anyone, I ended up falling asleep while I was racking my brains about how to decide the outcome of the battle.

After getting up, I realized the figure of the class D student Ayanokouji-kun, who I didn’t know when he arrived, inside the room.

“Go~od mor~ning Ayanokouji-kun. Sorry, my alarm clock must have surprised you.”

“No, not at all. It looks like you have slept well.”

“Ahahaha, sorry. I completely drowsed off. You are so early, there’s still 20 minutes left, you know?”

“You too, since when have you been here?”

“Roughly 1 hour ago. I wanted to stay here calmly. It’s noisy staying in the dorms, with friends going in and out of the room.

I wasn’t planning to sleep, but I was a bit embarrassed so I ended up saying that.

However, this might be a good thing. The result of this was that I could decide the battle plan.

“And there were also a lot of things I wanted to sort out.”

“Did you get results?”

“More or less.”

If I chase after 2 rabbits at the same time I will end up getting none. I have firmly established the policies to confront the Rabbit group.

Still, I am rarely together with Ayanokouji-kun alone, so let's investigate him.

Yukimura-kun and Sotomura-kun are easier to read, but Ayanokouji-kun looks like he is in the clouds, he is very hard to read.

I stood up, fixed my hair messed from sleep, and sat beside Ayanokouji-kun.

“Since there's still time until the exam starts, if it doesn't bother you, do you want to have a little chat?”

“It won't trouble me. If you think it's okay, then it's okay for me, Ichinose.”

He did not dislike it and agreed to my request.

“Then it's decided. I have something I wanted to ask Ayanokouji-kun. I have already asked all the Class B male students like Kanzaki-kun, but I haven't asked the students from the other classes, so it kept bothering me. Ayanokouji-kun, do you have a strong desire to be promoted to Class A?”

First of all, I need to ascertain his inner heart. What he thinks, for what goal he is taking action, and so on.

I have been questioning myself about the group distribution of this special exam. Being assigned into a group has a certain meaning. For example, Kanzaki-kun was assigned to the Dragon group, and the Dragon group had the names of the representatives of each class. I'm not trying to blow my own trumpet, but normally, shouldn't I be assigned to the Dragon group too?

But the reality didn't go like this. I was very discouraged during a split second, but I immediately pondered about it. It could be that there was another meaning.

There must be some implications in the fact that I was not sent to the Dragon group.

The Ayanokouji-kun in front of me could also be one of the possibilities--

Karuizawa Short Story: Invisible Presence

This was an event that happened not long after the special test started.

I went earlier to the Rabbit group exam room.

“I’ve come a bit early... but whatever”

Actually I didn’t intend to arrive this early, but approximately 10 minutes is still in an acceptable extent.

I only wanted to avoid meeting with Manabe and the other girls.

The reason being “that incident”. Reopening old wounds in these unexpected circumstances had disrupted my mood. Standing worried in front of the door of the room was also strange, so I simply entered directly into the room. Eg... I only saw Ayanokouji-kun waiting alone sitting on a chair alone after entering the room. The disgusted expression I adopted in a flash was seen by him, but it didn’t matter.

I didn’t want to approach him, so I made some distance with him. I chose the furthest place from him and I sat down.

During the period of time after this, I was passing time chatting with my friends with my phone.

After that, Rino wanted to have a phone call, so we did that.

“Ah, hello Rino. What’s the situation over there? This side? Ah--

, this side is not just terrible, the situation is at the limit. Even if I'm being separated from Hirata-kun, at least give they should give me some decent guys. This group is really full of malice.

It looked like there were a lot of girls in the group where Rino was allocated, so envious. I was having complicated feelings about thinking that they were in high spirits during my absence. Girls are certainly organisms that gossip behind the people they hate. In order to avoid issues from appearing after the test was finished, I should scout out in advance, in order to control them. This is the most important thing I should really be doing right now. After finishing the phone call with a few words, I inspected the chat log from start to finish to look for suspicious things. En, there shouldn't be any problem. At present my presence is still working.

Ayanokouji-kun, who was clamly waiting in the room, entered my field of vision.

“Ah—right. Are you the Target? It seems that neither Yukimura-kun nor So...-kun are.”

This thing was not important. I only asked in order to pass the time. How should I put it, I didn't have any impression of this guy. He was an unremarkable guy in the classroom, but I could still find him from the corners of my memory. Why? Just by thinking a little I arrived at the answer.

Just from appearance alone, Ayanokouji-kun doesn't look bad at all. If he could socialize as well as Hirata-kun, maybe he could become a person whose popularity wouldn't lose to him.

“I’m not”

He answered me briefly. No, totally impossible, he doesn’t possess dialogue skills. That’s why he is always mixed with old fashioned girls like Horikita-san and Sakura-san.

“Ah, I see. Then it’s okay”

“Do you believe me?”

Was it because I was suspicious? Ayanokouji-kun looked at me while saying this.

“Hah? You probably aren’t, right?”

I gave a slightly angry reply and he immediately shifted his gaze and stayed silent. You are a man, so embarrassing.

It’s useless to keep chatting with him. While thinking this, I took out my phone again.

In the end, besides Hirata-kun, there are no real men in class D.

That’s why I can’t leave his side.

Looking back right now, this was the first time Ayanokouji-kun and me spend time alone together.

In my three years of school life, he would become the most important and irreplaceable person, but at this very moment I wasn’t aware of it.